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# Wordsworth's British Empire: Property, Liberty, and the Slave Question

Anna Wingfield

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College of William & Mary

Wordsworth's British Empire  
Property, Liberty, and the Slave Question

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English Departmental Honors Thesis

Professors Levitan, Potkay, Webster, and Wheatley

April 12, 2019

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I would like to acknowledge the members of my honors committee, Professors Kathrin Levitan, Adam Potkay, Erin Webster, and Kim Wheatley for their guidance and encouragement this year. Another special thanks to Kim Wheatley as my honors advisor for her patience, diligence, and support throughout my career at William & Mary.

## Introduction

William Wordsworth provided the world with poetic expressions of a generation influenced by political upheaval, social disorder, and war. As the future of the British identity grew ambiguous amidst the rapid changes associated with industrialization, Wordsworth interwove nostalgia for a bucolic past with anxiety towards a modern future. Certain national debates on labor and the French Revolution nudged Wordsworth in the conservative direction much earlier than some of his contemporaries, and by later life his fervors for nationalism and for the protection of strict English values announced his emergence as a true Tory. Property stands at the center of Wordsworth's traditionalism, and his later transformation into a conservative was encouraged by his belief that rural English labor reinforced virtues such as self-reliance and humility that gave meaning to life.

Wordsworth's love of land inevitably brings into question his perspective on the abolition of human property; a letter written to Benjamin Dockray in 1833 most accurately conveys the poet's conservative political opinions, as he insisted that "slavery is not in itself at all times and under all circumstances to be deplored."<sup>1</sup> While Wordsworth's growing conservatism was not simply some anomalous phenomenon (indeed many Romantics grew less liberal over time), his personal maturation into a traditionalist deserves research because the nature of his traditionalism is so difficult to trace to one influence. By bringing together letters, political and historical backgrounds, and Wordsworth's poetry, I hope to show that Wordsworth's opinion on the emancipation of British colonial slaves was inextricably linked to his fear of immediate change within the empire itself, and how he specifically sought to preserve the rights of landowners. My research investigates the development of Wordsworth's definition of property over time,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years*, ed. E. de Selincourt, p. 648.

addressing specifically how this definition related to slavery in Wordsworth's published works. The main goal of my thesis is to prove that Wordsworth's culminating view on slavery was an extension of his belief that protecting English property equated to protecting the traditions and virtues of the nation.

The first section on property explains how Wordsworth connected agricultural labor to personal development, and more closely investigates how his poems utilize images of rural land as symbols for a traditional, virtuous English nation. The second section discusses Wordsworth's transformation from a self-proclaimed republican into a conservative, and how limited the definitions of freedom in his poetry are. The third section on transatlantic slavery and British colonialism will more closely connect readers to the abolitionist influences around Wordsworth; I will then examine his racialized poems that address the theme of slavery implicitly or explicitly, with the hope of revealing a narrative of his platform on the continuation of the British tradition as a farming nation. Wordsworth's response to colonial slavery in 1833 was not manufactured out of one vein of belief; philosophies on land ownership, personal freedom, and national identity all shaped his culminating conservative stance.

## **Section I: Rural Labor and English Virtue**

### **Background: Property and Moral Inheritance**

It is no secret that Wordsworth loved land; almost all of his major works incorporate the natural landscape as a representation of or a force fused with humanity. However, studying the particular influence of land ownership on the abolitionist debate provides a context for his sympathies towards slave owners in the 1833 letter. Despite John Locke's seventeenth-century definition of property as something every man has the natural right to acquire, Wordsworth's nineteenth-century England did not allow every man the equal opportunity to possess land;

although Locke addressed property more philosophically as a right to ownership and property in Wordsworth's context referred to land ownership specifically, an obvious disparity in opportunity was linked with land ownership in Wordsworth's England. This disparity in land ownership traditionally translated into British worth, and Wordsworth supported the idea that developing one's property represented establishing oneself in society.

Wordsworth's quest for a home was both literal and metaphorical, and his time at Racedown reinforced his desire for maintaining land because it served as a symbol for his stability. By 1795, William and Dorothy were living at Racedown, whose seclusion provided Wordsworth's mind respite from the stimulation of city life in London and drew him back into nature's influential fold. It was the first home shared by William and Dorothy since their childhood at Cockermouth, and it came to represent the beginning of a narrative of progress that had implicit political implications of ownership. During their residency, Dorothy wrote that Racedown was to be "the place dearest to my recollections... it was the first home I had."<sup>2</sup> By 1795, Wordsworth was revising his *Salisbury Plain*, written originally between 1793 and 1794; Stephen Gill suggests that the Treason Act and Sedition Meetings Act, both passed in 1795, sharpened Wordsworth's perceptions of corrupted power degrading the quality of lower-class life in England.<sup>3</sup> Although Wordsworth himself was not lower-class, he harbored worries for his own family's well-being as money had become an acute anxiety by May 1797. Azariah Pinney, the son of Racedown's owner John Pinney, had allowed Wordsworth to live on the property rent-free, but by June of 1797 the senior Pinney became aware of the transaction and the Wordsworths were placed under scrutiny for their dependence despite no formal intention of eviction. In the Racedown years, we see Wordsworth as a man quite worried about the state of

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<sup>2</sup> *Blackwood's Literary Magazine*, vol. 110, p. 302.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*, p. 96.

his financial affairs; at this point, Wordsworth had little to show for himself as a published English writer and his want of property embodies his desire to develop credibility as both a poet and a public figure.

In July of 1797, the Wordsworths travelled to Nether Stowey as guests of Samuel and Sara Coleridge, where they both fell in love with a property in Somerset known as Alfoxden. According to Dorothy, “the house [was] a very large mansion, with furniture enough for a dozen families like ours.”<sup>4</sup> The size of the property allowed the Wordsworths to host friends and colleagues for visits, stimulating scholarly discussion and artistic inspiration. Metaphorically, Alfoxden represented socialization whereas Racedown had represented isolation, and Wordsworth considered his exposure to other influential artists as a key factor in his poetic development. Gill corroborates this suggestion by stating that for both Wordsworth and Coleridge, “the year 1797-8 was one not of quietist withdrawal, but a period of great mental activity, in which they sought to define what would be for them the most appropriate field of endeavour.”<sup>5</sup>

As the Wordsworths established themselves at Alfoxden, their connections with political advocates elicited speculation from both the local Somerset and larger London communities. William and Dorothy received multiple visits from John Thelwall, a liberal sympathizer whose activism in favor of the French Revolution led to a trial for his life in 1794. These visits, coupled with Dorothy and William’s platonic yet arcane relationship and their friendship with the radical Samuel Coleridge, led local authorities to investigate the rumored band of French supporters in the summer of 1798; speculation resulted in the termination of William’s lease of Alfoxden in

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth to Mary Hutchinson, 14 Aug. 1797. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth Vol 1: The Early Years*, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> Gill, p. 129.

September of that same year.<sup>6</sup> Despite its brevity, the Wordsworths' residence at Alfoxden yielded intellectual stimulation and poetic creation; many of the *Lyrical Ballads* poems were composed in this space, and the domestic appeals of the home undoubtedly strengthened the desire for William to acquire his own property. However, the Wordsworths were preparing for a trip to Germany with Samuel, and it wouldn't be until the end of 1799 that the pair would return to their childhood Lake District and settle into a more permanent residency at Dove Cottage.

By the time the Wordsworths arrived at Dove Cottage in December, William was exceedingly conscious of his desire to secure influence and acquire his own property; in fact, Wordsworth did not own any of the homes that he lived in throughout his lifetime. For the first time we see Wordsworth make genuine attempts to redefine the space with his imagination, connecting the physical space with idealistic notions of home. The 1800 poem *Home at Grasmere* communicates the feelings of exultation Wordsworth experienced in returning to his childhood Lakes, and we can observe the greater sense of communal endurance that Wordsworth attributes to his perceptions of home: "this individual Spot,/ This small abiding-place of many men/...Made for itself and happy in itself,/ Perfect Contentment, Unity entire" (*Home at Grasmere* ll. 164-170). Kenneth Johnston writes in his *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, that "in 1800, the Wordsworths were not returning home to Grasmere but going to Grasmere *as if* it were home, a situation 'conducive to a self-conscious awareness of himself as an observer.'"<sup>7</sup> Inspired by the land and its residents, Wordsworth completed many of his most famous works in the eight years at Grasmere; furthermore, Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson and started a family while living at Dove Cottage. Land and inhabitant thus converged as Wordsworth developed his

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, p. 82.



personal and professional lives, and protecting either meant protecting the source of sublimity that gave meaning to Wordsworth's own existence.

William's residency at Dove Cottage initiated the question of how his love for the people of a place could be translated into political affiliations. His time at Grasmere provided deeper thought and a calmness that contrasted with the rapid moving periods that made up most of his earlier life; by the time Wordsworth arrived at his final home, Rydal Mount, in 1813, the radical sentiments of his boyhood days seemed as distant as the country that had inspired them.

Wordsworth would spend the rest of his life at Rydal Mount despite never owning the property himself; home for Wordsworth now seemed deeply rooted in ancient soil both literally and metaphorically. The years of striving for property were driven by Wordsworth's desire to have influence in English literary and political societies, but as his life stabilized so too did his liberal affiliations. Grasmere manifests itself as the retiring ground for Wordsworth's radical writings, and as Wordsworth settled into Rydal Mount, he "sought to understand himself as he had been [as a young liberal sympathizer], from the vantage point of what he was now."<sup>8</sup> For the rest of his life, Wordsworth's affiliations with property came to represent a love for the English land that eventually equated to a love of traditional Englishness.

## **Plough and Hearth as Protectors of National Integrity**

### ***Salisbury Plain***<sup>9</sup>

Wordsworth's anxiety about the lack of compassion for the English lower class appears throughout the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, but even earlier traces of this critique can be seen in his 1793 long poem, *Salisbury Plain*. This poem, written mainly during a walking tour through

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<sup>8</sup> Gill, p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all poems are quoted from *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill.

Wales between July and September, makes a connection between the lack of a permanent home and the struggles of man; one could argue that the beginning of his conservatism can be traced here considering the traditional association of property with virtue. Wordsworth colors the opening of his poem darkly with the lines: “Hard is the life when naked and unhoused /And wasted by the long day's fruitless pains, /The hungry savage, 'mid deep forests, roused/ By storms, lies down at night on unknown plains /And lifts his head in fear...” (*SP* ll. 1-5). Men without homes are lessened to savages, and throughout the poem the Soldier reverts to crime in order to survive; in this context, the inability to possess land disables men from living morally righteous lives. Wordsworth's second line of this excerpt essentially expresses the idea that the savage's inability to sow and reap sustenance makes his life meaningless, as if he “waste[s]” his existence by failing to have a fruitful harvest. Furthermore, the use of the word “savage” implies a reversion to uncivilized modes of life, which I believe suggests that the savage's life proves hard because he cannot labor on the land and provide for himself. The savage will never be able to progress into an intellectual, progressive being because he lacks the opportunity to develop land (and thus himself), instead being destined to forever sleep in fear amidst “unknown plains.”

Early in the poem, Wordsworth creates a sense of tension through the wandering figure's need of shelter that can only be resolved by the character's acquisition of a home. As the character makes his way through the gloomy plains, “huge piles of corn-stack here and there were seen/ But thence no smoke upwreathed his sight to cheer;/ And see the homeward shepherd dim appear” (*SP*, ll. 48-50). The character becomes more wild and forlorn as he seeks “in vain, a shepherd's lowly thorn/ Or hovel from the storm to shield his head” (*SP* ll. 59-60) and the vacancy of the undeveloped plains evokes an overwhelming sense of isolation as the man struggles to find a physical shelter. The man longs for a connection with other humans, and the

implication that he would feel “cheer” in coming across a physical dwelling suggests that home for Wordsworth symbolized not only establishment but further a communal connection. Indeed, the man tearfully eyes “the crows in blackening eddies homeward borne” (*SP* l. 58) because they fly together, and have a sense of purpose as they travel back to where they belong. In *Salisbury Plain*, the home holds significance not only because it shelters men from the elements, but because it represents a stable place where villages are generated and people connect with one another.

The power of community is reinforced when the wanderer finally discovers an abandoned castle within which he can take respite from the unwavering storm. He takes comfort in the sense of community afforded by his being in a place created by other humans: “How glad he was at length to find a place/ That bore of human hands the chearing trace” (*SP* ll. 130-31).

Furthermore, he eventually comes into contact with a homeless woman, and she tells the tale of how she found the greatest sense of purpose in her life when she was working in her gardens and helping her family tend to their home. This story strengthens the argument that property functions as an indicator of human establishment, insofar as the woman reminisces with happiness on the times when she labored on the family’s land: “With thoughtless joy I stretched along the shore/ My parent’s nets, or watched, when from the fold/ High o’er the cliffs I led his fleecy store” (*SP*, ll. 231-33). While working with her family and developing their property, she took pride in the sense of productivity that domestic tasks such as fishing, gardening, and tending to livestock provided:

Can I forget my seat beneath the thorn,  
My garden stored with peas and mint and thyme  
And rose and lilly for the Sabbath morn;  
The church-inviting bell’s delightful chime,  
The merriment and song at shearing time,  
My hen’s rich nest with long grass overgrown,  
The cowslip gathering at the morning prime  
The hazel copse with teeming clusters brown...

(*Salisbury Plain* ll. 235-243)

The vividness of the narrator's memory evokes pastoral nostalgia, with verbs such as "stored," "gathering," and "shearing" emphasizing the active process of collection on the farm. Wordsworth's use of words such as "rich," "teeming," and "prime" infuses the poem with a deeper sense of fulfillment, which then encourages readers to interpret the land itself as a source of human development. The farm symbolizes the fullness afforded by a life of constant action, a life tinged with meaning forged by the upkeep of one's own land. However, the warm and idyllic image of home declines as her father's property falls "into decay" and her family is "turned out into the cold winds, alone [to wander] wide" (*SP*, ll. 256, 261). Gone were the days where "constant toil" supplied daily bread for the children; instead, "labor's cheerful hum" was replaced by "silence and fear, and misery's weeping train" as "the loom stood still" (*SP*, ll. 290, 298, 299).

However, Wordsworth presents rural labor as a surviving force and readers are left feeling optimistic from descriptions brimming with abundance and countrified bliss. The narrator reflects that property and its maintenance will provide them both with comforts that more extravagant dwellings could not:

For you yon milkmaid bears her brimming load,  
For you the board is piled with homely bread,  
And think that life is like this desert broad,  
Where all the happiest find is but a shed  
And a green spot 'mid wastes interminably spread.  
(*Salisbury Plain*, ll. 418-422)

The focus on a traditional, rural lifestyle indicates that Wordsworth was positioned to embrace conservative politics even before the violent backlash of the French Revolution. While the poem liberally critiques the military and tyranny, it more so glorifies country toil and implies that protecting property equates to protecting the source of fulfillment in human life. These descriptions of property as vital to man's existence complicate a cut-and-dried interpretation of

Wordsworth's later response to abolition because we see the founding of his perception that protecting the rights of landowners protected the very essence of the country's virtue.

### ***The Ruined Cottage***

In April of 1797, two months before the Wordsworths left Racedown for Alfoxden, William had begun revisions to *The Ruined Cottage*, a poem later incorporated into *The Excursion*. This poem, in two parts, tells the story of Margaret and how she falls into despair following the disappearance of her husband during wartime. We experience the poem through the Wanderer's narration of his multiple visits to the house, and are left with a scene of desolation as nature reclaims the once-maintained cottage for its own. *The Ruined Cottage* portrays the dilapidation of the poor by grafting humanity onto property, investigating more explicitly the interconnectedness of the two and how the state of the home alludes to the well-being of its inhabitants.

For example, as Margaret weathers the absence of her husband, her detachment from duty manifests itself in the degradation of her cottage. Wordsworth connected a sense of hope to the image of Margaret in the early spring, as the Wanderer leaves her "busy with her garden tools;/ And well remember[s], o'er that fence she looked" (*RC* ll. 283-84). In this instance, Margaret's renewed sense of vigor for life manifests itself in her tending to her home, and the narrator feels confident that she will overcome her problems because she continues to work. However, when the Wanderer returns in the summertime, his acute observations on the growing disorder of the house predispose him to believe that all is not well with its inhabitants:

Her cottage in its outward appearance look appeared  
As cheerful as before; in any shew  
Of neatness little changed, but then I thought  
The honeysuckle crowded round the door  
And from the wall hung down the heavier wreathes,  
And knots of worthless stone crop started-out  
Along the windows edge, and grew like weeds  
Against the lower panes. I turned aside

And strolled into her garden. ---It was changed:  
 The unprofitable bindweed spread his bells  
 From side to side and with unwieldy wreaths  
 Had dragged the rose from its sustaining wall  
 And bent it down to earth; the border-tufts---  
 Daisy and thrift and lowly chamomile  
 And thyme- had straggled out into the paths  
 Which they were used to deck. Ere this an hour  
 Was wasted.

(*The Ruined Cottage* ll. 305-21)

As nature subtly begins to overthrow manmade structures in this image, readers get the sense that somehow the roughness of the landscape will be infused into Margaret herself. The “worthless stone crop” grows over the windows “like weeds,” which overpowers the delicacy of the honeysuckle by growing in “knots”; the image of the stonecrop attempting to dominate the windows suggests that nature is attempting to supersede man and his artificial creation, while also possibly insinuating that Margaret no longer perceives her world clearly. Eventually the stonecrop will block light from entering the dwelling, which leaves the interior subject to dankness and death.

Margaret’s home reaches utmost degradation in the heart of winter, as all elements of rural plenty decline and allude to her own desolation. Unlike the first visits where “the mower’s scythe had swept/ The dewey grass” (*RC* ll. 123-124), and those who passed “might hear his busy spade” (*RC* l. 127), when the Wanderer returns the cottage appears entirely dilapidated and no signs of upkeep can be observed. As the gates of the garden come into view, the Wanderer immediately feels that ruin has solidified its grasp on both the cottage and its denizens:

I turned towards the garden-gate and saw  
 More plainly still that poverty and grief  
 Were now come nearer to her: the earth was hard,  
 With weeds defaced and knots of withered grass;  
 No ridges there appeared of clear black mould,  
 No winter greenness: of her herbs and flowers  
 It seemed the better part were gnawed away  
 Or trampled on the earth; a chain of straw  
 Which had been twisted round the tender stem  
 Of a young apple-tree lay at its root;  
 The bark was nibbled round by truant sheep.

(*The Ruined Cottage*, ll. 412-22)

In this passage, no feminine imagery thrives; instead the “herbs and flowers” that are referred to as Margaret’s have been “gnawed away/ Or trampled on the earth.” Even the simplest forms of life such as “black mould” fail to generate on the “hard earth,” and readers get the sense that no effort has been made by Margaret to cultivate and preserve life in the garden. The interior of the cottage “Bespoke a sleepy hand of negligence;/ The floor was neither dry nor neat, the hearth/ Was comfortless” (*RC* ll. 401-403). The word “negligence” casts a negative light on Margaret’s idleness, and the disregard of her internal surroundings may symbolize Margaret’s lack of self-care.

If Margaret’s cottage embodies her own well-being, the poem expresses the necessity of action to maintain happiness. In the first version of the manuscript, *The Ruined Cottage* ends with Margaret dying as the “last human tenant of these ruined walls” (*RC* l. 492), and readers are left to assume that nature overtakes and reclaims the cottage for its own; in these passages we see how Wordsworth affirmed appreciation for domestic labor through his diction. Margaret declines simultaneously with her home, and as indolence immerses her more fully into ruin, we see labor as the driving force of success or at least survival in Wordsworth’s work. In this context, Wordsworth criticizes wartime as a period of conflict that prohibits the rural family dynamic, and his ideal nation exists as a collection of simple lives defined by the daily labors of plough and hearth.

### **“Michael”**

“Michael” investigates the relationship between man and property, but this particular poem portrays the inheritance of land as a symbol for the preservation of family values.

Published in the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, this pastoral work grapples with the notion that land enables the survival of humanity; in a January 1801 letter to Charles Fox regarding the

poem, Wordsworth wrote that for every small landowner, “their little tract of land serves as a permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet on which they are written, which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances, when they would otherwise be forgotten” (*EY* 261). In this context, land is an immeasurably valuable possession not only because it serves as a physical resource with which men can inscribe and enshrine their existences, but also because the act of working on the land facilitates domestic feelings. “Michael” presents the family dynamic as being pivotal to the reception of emotions, and Wordsworth confirmed this statement in his letter as he wrote that men uninvolved in affairs of the home had “little doing in [their] house in which [their] affections can be interested, and but little left in which [they] can love” (*EY* 261). Wordsworth’s anxiety over the breakup of the family unit can be observed in Luke’s character, as he moves to the “dissolute city” and gives himself to vice, thus severing the familial relationship that his parents maintained.

The family dynamic in “Michael” relies heavily on the land itself, not only because the property facilitates daily work that reinforces the components of domesticity, but also because the land symbolizes the continuation of a family’s legacy. The land gets passed down throughout generations, providing both an inheritance of property as well as an inheritance of family values. We are encouraged to see Michael’s commitment to the land as a commitment to the extenuation of his memory. For example, he remains diligent in his daily labors because he believes his works have “like a book preserv’d the memory” of his life (l. 70). To Michael, the land represents his lifetime of honest, hard work, a life lived by his forefathers who were “not loth/ To give their bodies to the family mold” (ll. 379-380). The letter to Fox emphasizes land as an extension of the farmer himself, and as a “fountain fitted to the nature of social man from which supplies of affection, as pure as his heart was intended for, are daily drawn” (*EY* 262). Therefore,



Michael decides to save the “patrimonial fields” because they are “his living Being, even more/ Than his own Blood...” (ll. 74-75). To Michael, the land not only represents the past lives of his predecessors, but the future lives of his successors; Michael projects love for his son onto the land, thus believing that preserving the property will provide Luke with an opportunity for a rewarding life.

The chaos that ensues following Luke’s departure for the city allow space for critiques to see “Michael” as a poem concerned with the protection of property at the rise of industry. Wordsworth wrote to Fox that he saw the “spreading of manufactures” (*EY* 260) as a hindrance to self-sufficiency, saying “if it is true... that this spirit of [independence] is rapidly disappearing, no greater curse can befall a land” (*EY* 261). This sentiment reveals Wordsworth’s anxiety towards industrialization, and the letter allows readers to observe those same tensions projected onto the poem. Luke’s downfall may suggest that rural labor cannot reinforce the strict morality that protects men from wickedness, which weakens the integrity of domesticity. However, Michael’s commitment to the land following the loss of his son shows the strength of the independent rural spirit as something that can withstand the tests of time.

Maintaining and protecting the land serves as the best way to enable man’s self-sufficiency, as best embodied in Michael himself. He refers to the sheep-fold as a project that was originally intended to be completed by them both, but is now “a work for me” (l. 396). The mentions of shepherding throughout the poem portray Michael as an independent leader who guides others around him, and “Michael” leaves readers with the image of “the remains/ Of the unfinished Sheep-fold” (ll. 489-490), which signifies both the broken bonds of the family dynamic and the attempts of one to carry on the survival of his family. The sheep-fold represents a covenant between father and son, a commitment to the perpetuation of their legacy; however,

the incompleteness of this “emblem of the life thy Fathers lived” (l. 420) represents the loss of Luke, and thus the loss of Michael’s legacy. Understanding the ways in which Wordsworth connected land with humanity in “Michael” allows readers to more clearly understand the deeper significance of property for landowners. To Michael, the land embodied everything that defined him, everything that was integral in shaping the man that he became; his longing to continue the cycle of inheritance thus represents the desire to perpetuate his family’s virtues. The foundations of Wordsworth’s conservative nationalism can be observed in “Michael” if we apply the poem’s premise of inheritance to the nation: by protecting English property one ensures the survival of those values of self-sufficiency, honesty, and humility that are the idyllic pillars of English identity.

### **“Home at Grasmere”**

Wordsworth began writing “Home at Grasmere” in the spring of 1800, but much confusion exists regarding its author’s intention for the piece and its final form. Kenneth Johnston explains that “although ‘Home at Grasmere’ deserves to be read as a complete poem, [and has been done as such], the present context requires that it be separated out into its two main compositional eras, 1800 and 1806.”<sup>10</sup> The first 500 or so lines written in 1800 are far more personal to Wordsworth’s own time and space, whereas the last 450 lines composed in 1806 “present a remarkably coherent yet fantastically literal response to the problems that had stopped Wordsworth’s composition on the poem in 1800: ... the need to generalize persuasively beyond his own experience.”<sup>11</sup> Only one passage of the poem would be published in the Preface to *The Excursion* in 1814, and the entirety of “Home at Grasmere” would not appear as its own free-standing poem until 1888, thirty-eight years after Wordsworth’s death. Nevertheless, “Home at

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<sup>10</sup> Johnston, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

Grasmere” presents Wordsworth’s efforts in imagining what it means to make a home both physically and emotionally, and Gill complements this theme with historical context by asserting that for the first time while at Grasmere, Wordsworth would “[try] to incorporate the region into his imagination, to claim it, and so make himself truly at home.”<sup>12</sup> The poem thus communicates these personal efforts while also providing reflections on a more universal notion of home, encouraging readers to consider just how significantly our landscape determines our sense of higher purpose.

“Home at Grasmere” introduces the same sense of familial inheritance existing in “Michael,” but more explicitly asserts that country living reinforces traditional values that places it above the ordinary world:

... this deep vale, as it doth in part  
 Conceal us from the storm, so here there is  
 A Power and a protection for the mind,  
 Dispensed indeed to other solitudes  
 Favoured by noble privilege like this,  
 Where kindred independence of estate  
 Is prevalent, where he who tills the field,  
 He, happy Man! is Master of the field,  
 And treads the mountain which his Father trod.  
 Hence, and from other local circumstance,  
 In this enclosure many of the old  
 Substantial virtues have a firmer tone  
 Than in the base and ordinary world.  
 (“Home at Grasmere” ll. 256-268, *Major Works* 2008)

Just as the physical landscape protects the community from violent storms, it also provides mental protection by fortifying the small landowners with the “old/ Substantial virtues”; however, Wordsworth required a certain level of status with these virtues by praising the happiness that comes from the ownership of property. He directly linked “Power” to “solitudes/ Favoured by noble privilege,” and while the word “noble” may refer to aristocracy, readers may also consider it a reference to righteousness or moral principles. In the context of the poem, the

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<sup>12</sup> Gill, p. 180.

latter explanation seems strengthened by Wordsworth's comments that "kindred independence of estate/ Is prevalent" and those owning the land here till their own fields. While assuming that many people probably did not own large estates of land indicative of gentrification, there was a stronger tradition of small landownership in rural areas that enabled a greater sense of community. Activity proves vital for fulfilment in this passage, and happy is the man who "is Master of the field" (l. 8).

Even though the overall sentiment of the passage encourages readers to see ownership as beneficial because it provides moral development and perpetuates family legacies, one can't help but consider the diction problematic for its connotations when placed in the context of slavery. Despite the absence of slaves in the United Kingdom, the theme of mastering the field in this passage evokes an image of plantation ownership; even though the owners are the laborers in this passage, Wordsworth's emphatic defense of a national system reliant on rural labor creates space for an expanded (albeit fallacious) application of this practice in the colonies as well as a justification for slavery itself.

While "Home at Grasmere" does not directly define freedom, it does insinuate that labor affords a greater sense of independence by both independent and communal means. Wordsworth suggests that the self-reliance demanded of the country lifestyle created a community of individuals who were equipped to aid their neighbors in times of trouble:

Yet it is something gained, it is in truth  
 A mighty gain, that Labour here preserves  
 His rosy face, a Servant only here  
 Of the fire-side or of the open field,  
 A Freeman, therefore sound and unimpaired;  
 That extreme penury is here unknown,  
 And cold and hunger's abject wretchedness  
 Mortal to body and the heaven-born mind;  
 That they who want, are not too great a weight  
 For those who can relieve; here may the heart  
 Breathe in the air of fellow-suffering  
 Dreadless, as in a kind of fresher breeze  
 Of her own native element, the hand

Be ready and unwearied without plea  
 From task too frequent and beyond its power,  
 For languor or indifference or despair.  
 (*Home at Grasmere* ll. 439-454)

In this passage, readers are almost immediately conditioned to read “Labour” in a positive light through introductory remarks that there is “a mighty gain” in its existence; furthermore, Wordsworth reflected that the gain not only came from labor’s presence, but more from the preservation of “His rosy face.” The word “rosy” may attribute healthfulness or vigor to labor’s appearance, or it may be signaling that a time of good fortune comes where labor resides. Wordsworth then juxtaposed images of a servant and a freeman, saying that the rural laborer is both, though only a servant to the forces of nature. By comparing the two, readers are obliged to consider a metaphorical hierarchy of ownership in Wordsworth’s “Home at Grasmere,” with man contractually indebted to the higher elements of landscape that imbue the mind with “sound and unimpaired” qualities. However, the implicit reference to the mind in line 443 as well as its overt mention in line 446 begs the questions: where does the mind fit in the hierarchy of labor with nature and man, and can the mind be free even if constricted by servitude? The poet’s ambiguous “Freeman” coupled with the sense of comradeship created by “fellow-suffering” makes the poem problematic in the context of slavery. It seems almost paradoxical that true freedom relies on an obligation to laboring the land, and despite the lower levels of poverty due to communal aid, we begin to wonder if Wordsworth’s definition of freedom provides a space for exploitation- and to whose detriment.

While the rest of the passage may not answer these larger questions, it does go on to suggest that the relative displacement of need within the country defends the mind from unnerving feelings of suffering and isolation that would otherwise drive men to despair. The use of semicolons as well as the repetition of “that” implies that the separate clauses are all “mighty

gains,” and Wordsworth expresses gratitude for the fact that the rural area does not know poverty and destitution because they would be “mortal to body and the heaven-born mind.” In this phrase, Wordsworth distinguishes between mind and body with the mind being created out of the divine; however, he believed both to be susceptible to mortality. Labor and penury seem starkly contrasted in this segment, and the thriving of the mind proves reliant on the independence afforded by work. However, the independence of each country laborer facilitates a communal dependence where “they who want, are not too great a weight/ For those who can relieve.” Even in times of widespread hardship, individuals in the rural community can experience suffering without trepidation because they can rely on those around them for assistance. Labor functions as a mechanism that both protects and provides; therefore, the question of the mind’s freedom being independent amidst servitude grows more complicated because it is through labor that men protect themselves from a destitution that proves fatal to the “heaven-born mind.”

## **Section II: Limitations of Wordsworthian Liberty**

### **Background: The Makings of a Conservative Nationalist**

After finishing his studies at Cambridge, Wordsworth arrived in France amidst the Revolution in 1791; at this point, Wordsworth embraced the revolutionary overthrow of monarchical government because he believed it to be a catalyst for global peace, or at least European harmony. F.M. Todd asserts that “to a Wordsworth already schooled in the literary tradition opposed to militarism and concerned particularly with the sufferings of the poor in time of war, the pacifist appeal was a strong one.”<sup>13</sup> However, Wordsworth’s writing at this time defended the violence brought about by the Revolution, and although his radical support

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<sup>13</sup> F.M. Todd, *Politics and the Poet*, p. 51.

appeared rooted in pacifism, Wordsworth understood violence at this time as a temporary means of achieving a peaceful end.

In the unpublished *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, written during the Reign of Terror in 1793 when he was back in England, Wordsworth attacked Richard Watson's politics and defended violence as a necessary stimulus for better things to come. Edward Hooker argues that this argument aligns Wordsworth with Thomas Paine, symbolizing a symmetry between American revolutionists and English supporters of the French republican cause.<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth's *Letter* argues that the violence of the people was merely a symptom of an incapable government; likewise, Thomas Paine's 1791 *Rights of Man* defended the Revolution's bloodshed on the grounds that man's mind absorbs such degradation at the hands of corruptive government that "at the commencement of a revolution, those men are rather the followers of the *camp* than of the *standard* of liberty, and have yet to be instructed on how to reverence it."<sup>15</sup>

Wordsworth's searing criticism of Watson in part serves also as a criticism of English conservative Edmund Burke. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published earlier in 1790, describes England as a model society where property, law, and manners are passed down through generations and preserve morality as a creation of habit. James Chandler suggests that Wordsworth and Burke's perceptions of English morality clashed, as Wordsworth then favored the spirit of enlightenment over "the force of habit [that] blinds the eye of reason and makes a nation cling to the government of their forefathers."<sup>16</sup> However, by the time Wordsworth returned to England, he felt increasingly obligated to turn away from this ideology when the violence went beyond the bounds of France and threatened England.

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Niles Hooker, "Wordsworth's Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff."

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, Pt. 1, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> James K. Chandler, "Wordsworth and Burke," pp. 746-747.

As the Revolution grew more violent, Wordsworth grew more disillusioned with the totalitarian demands of French republicans. British government recoiled from the French cause, adopting conservative laws as a means of protecting the country from structural upheaval. Whigs argued that “a Tory government had no right to call on the unfranchised for the defence of an obsolete constitution,”<sup>17</sup> and since Wordsworth prioritized removing France as a national danger before settling domestic affairs, he endorsed Tory politics as a means of protecting his beloved homeland. Likewise, Wordsworth’s severed relationship with Annette Vallon and subsequent betrothal to Mary Hutchinson paralleled his turning away from French frivolity: in affairs both national and personal, Wordsworth embraced rationality and tradition over impulsive action. As he attempted to absolve his own involvement with wicked France, he embraced the English virtues of purity, stability, and order that conservatives believed made the nation great.

This shift in views corresponded with a penchant for country people that had always existed in Wordsworth; Todd concludes that Wordsworth’s admiration of the unique virtue of country domestic life was bound to lead him to an even closer identification with their interests and outlooks.<sup>18</sup> Following the fall of the Peace Treaty of Amiens between France and England in 1803, Parliament passed legislation that prepared military troops in the event that France should attack. During this period of tension, dubbed the “Great Terror,” Wordsworth went on a walking tour of Scotland with Dorothy and Coleridge. It was here that he came into contact with Sir Walter Scott, who discussed with him ideas on the roles of poetry and the citizen-soldier within the nation. Richard Matlak asserts that Scott’s discussion of the citizen-soldier as one who “rises to the occasion for as long as needed out of love of home and country”<sup>19</sup> instilled within

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<sup>17</sup> Todd, p. 125.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Matlak, “Wordsworth and the ‘Great Terror’ of 1803-1805,” p. 24.



Wordsworth a sense of patriotism that linked him more closely with northern England. Once returned from Scotland, Wordsworth's immersion into the "patriotic climate of Westmorland and Cumberland counties transformed him into a citizen-soldier,"<sup>20</sup> which encouraged him to sever ties to radicalism and adopt the conservative principles of the North.

William's connections to northern England and its customs were strengthened by his acquisition of patronage following the death of James Lowther in 1802. Wordsworth's father had worked as a steward for Lowther and the conscious disregard of the Wordsworths following his father's death left William and his siblings destitute despite being owed nearly 4,000 pounds by the Lowther estate. The new inheritor of the Lowther estate, Lord William Lowther, proved to be far more benevolent than his predecessor and paid the Wordsworths' debt, allowing William the means to marry his childhood friend, Mary Hutchinson. As a result of this opportunity, William felt increasingly grateful for Lord Lowther's assistance, and Tim Fulford asserts that this sense of indebtedness fortified Wordsworth's adoption of conservative customs: "Accepting Lowther's patronage caused Wordsworth to change his social views... he became increasingly Tory, accepting the paternalism of the landed class as a bastion against commercialism."<sup>21</sup> For the most part, Wordsworth's early days of championing the radical cause of liberty to reform the conditions of the poor were gone; now that he had achieved financial stability, he upheld the same appreciation for stability in his political affiliations.

The end of the Revolution ushered in a resurgence of political conservatism in England, and Wordsworth's own love of country disabled him from supporting political reform because admitting that England needed change meant admitting that English traditions were flawed. Todd

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<sup>20</sup> Matlak, "Wordsworth and the Great Terror," p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Tim Fulford, "Wordsworth: The Politics of Landscape" in *Landscape, Liberty and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth*, p. 192.

reflects that “it became increasingly difficult for Wordsworth, having apotheosized his country as the defender of liberty, to criticize or find need for reform in her constitution by virtue of which the country maintained supremacy.”<sup>22</sup> Gone were the days where Wordsworth criticized Burkean political philosophies as irrational and oppressive; indeed, by the posthumous publication of *The Prelude*, he glorified the “Genius of Burke” for denouncing “all systems built on abstract rights” (*Prelude* VII., ll. 512, 524 respectively). While there are many veins of research that investigate specifically why Wordsworth turned towards Burke, one relevant point for this study can be emphasized: by the time Wordsworth wrote to Dockray in 1833, he had adopted the Burkean conservatism that represented “a synecdoche for the tradition that upholds age, experience, custom, and habit- for tradition itself.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Liberty and its Restricted Application**

Readers can now understand the foundations of Wordsworth’s conservative politics as an extension of his love of land and the values he believed it to represent, but to understand those views more concretely as they pertain to abolition, we must investigate the limitations of his definition of liberty, and who specifically liberty was limited for. While his disillusionment with the French Revolution was apparent in the late 1790s, Wordsworth wouldn’t explicitly define his expectations for a successful society and write more politically until the Napoleonic Wars in 1802; this year proved to be exceedingly hectic under the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, specifically in the French colonies in the Caribbean. In this year alone, Bonaparte oversaw two battles resulting in French victories during the Haitian Revolution, reinstated slavery in the French colonies, and captured Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of Revolutionary forces in

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<sup>22</sup> Todd, p. 150.

<sup>23</sup> Chandler, “Wordsworth and Burke,” p. 752.

Haiti. Despite the internal disarray of the French nation, this year was ironically the single year of peace from 1793-1814 between France and the United Kingdom as a product of the Treaty of Amiens. With barriers once again broken between the countries, William returned to France in August of 1802 to see his former lover, Annette, and their daughter Caroline, for the first time in ten years. National and personal worlds became linked, but while both were at a technical point of amity, tensions were high and the growing dissonance between England and France made the contrasts stronger than ever. The radicalization of politics was bleeding into the personal choices Wordsworth made, and as he said goodbye to his French family to marry the English Mary Hutchinson, so too did he turn away from French republicanism towards traditionally deferential England. The writings of this tumultuous time not only embody the personal anxieties of a poet who had to make decisions that solidified his future, but furthermore the anxieties of a nation that held its breath, waiting for the signs of a future steeped either in additional war or European peace.

During and after his 1802 trip to France, Wordsworth wrote in a more explicitly political style on themes of nation, individual, and freedom; these poems would be published as a collective under the title *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty* in the first volume of his 1807 *Poems in Two Volumes*. Much confusion surrounds this assortment of sonnets, specifically in determining which poems are or aren't part of the collection; however, we do know that there are twenty-six poems listed under the title, including "Composed on the Sea-Side near Calais," "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," "September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1802," and "London, 1802." These sonnets not only denounce the chaotic upheavals wrought by French republicanism but more importantly convey the responsibilities of the English individual to society. The employment of the sonnet form suggests that Wordsworth wanted to align himself with the politically active poet, John Milton; however,

Wordsworth's poetic form deviates from either Shakespearean or Petrarchan. This divergence from tradition intimates a certain disorder that may be indicative of the changes in his own life: as he returned to France, Wordsworth faced not only the affair that materialized his youthful impetuosity but furthermore a country whose republican ideals had inspired him as a young adult. Wordsworth stood in a liminal space between past and future, the man he used to be and the man he wanted to become. The *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty* affirm Wordsworth's affections for England as well as his disdain for Napoleonic tyranny. These writings denounce the mentality of French republicanism and the denial of individual thought, instead upholding England as a glorious example of unity on the basis of virtue; while Wordsworth may have expressed anxiety towards the threat against national institutions, the sonnets effectively communicate the faith he had in the English commonwealth tradition and its ability to triumph over the unceasing change of revolutionary France.

**“Composed By the Sea-Side, near Calais, August 1802”**

“Composed by the Sea-Side, near Calais, August 1802” constructs Wordsworth's literal and figurative visions of England from the coast of France, revealing the strength of his nationalistic ties to his homeland and his belief that England stands alone as a shining star of leadership in a world of disarray:

Fair Star of Evening, Splendor of the West,  
 Star of my Country! on the horizon's brink  
 Thou hangest, stooping, as might seem, to sink  
 On England's bosom; yet well pleased to rest,  
 Meanwhile, and be to her a glorious crest  
 Conspicuous to the Nations. Thou, I think,  
 Should'st be my Country's emblem; and should'st wink,  
 Bright Star! with laughter on her banners, drest  
 In thy fresh beauty. There! that dusky spot  
 Beneath thee, it is England; there it lies.  
 Blessings be on you both! One hope, one lot,  
 One life, one glory! I, with many a fear  
 For my dear Country, many heartfelt sighs,  
 Amongst men who do not love her linger here.  
 (“Composed by the Sea-Side, near Calais”)

Wordsworth's declarations in the first line directly address a star that dangles over his homeland, but its ambiguous introduction allows space for readers to assume he addresses his own country rather than the star itself. Delaying the apostrophe, "Star of my Country!" encourages the interpretation that Wordsworth considered England to be the true "Splendor of the West," as both the star and the shape of England lie on the brink of his horizon. He then fuses the two entities together, as the star seems to descend into England's bosom; even though language such as "stooping" and "sink" suggests that the star must dissociate from the divine to come down and touch England, the star ultimately is "well-pleased" to rest on English soil. Furthermore, the star distinguishes England amongst other nations as a leader, and just as humans follow the stars for divine guidance, the implication is that the nations of the world should follow England for virtuous guidance. Wordsworth strengthened this connection by reflecting that the star "should'st be my Country's emblem," as if to liken his nation to a fixed body of incandescence that has existed for all time. The stars illustrate beauty and magnificence, allowing us mere mortals to believe in the possibility of some greater, higher authority governing our lives; the sonnet depicts England as that same higher authority, as a chosen country touched by the celestial and interfused with a supremacy that grants it power to lead the rest of the world.

The end of the poem more directly exhibits the unification through communal appreciation for values that Wordsworth believed to be the touchstone of English survival. After suggesting that the star should be the country's insignia, the narrator advises the star to "wink" (l. 7) which implies a certain light-heartedness that contrasts with the serious tone connected with France at the time. England and the stars (and metaphorically the higher powers of the divine) seem to have an exceptionally intimate relationship, one that exemplifies the values that separate England from France. As Wordsworth literally looks at his homeland from across the French

Channel, he indicates that the two countries are contrasted by more than just space; England embodies principles of beauty, mirth, and tradition with “laughter on her banners, drest/ In thy fresh beauty,” far from the seriousness of a France plagued by overthrow, somberness, and austerity. These English values are inherited from the stars themselves, as if acquired from Heavenly hosts who instill their blessings on the land itself; Wordsworth emphasized the continuity between the two in his final lines, which unify the two as “one hope, one lot,/ One life, one glory!” However, this unification of the nation and the divine may also be extended to the unification of the individuals within the kingdom, a unification reliant on a love for the values that have ensured survival for hundreds of years. The poem ends with a reference to this love, and how Wordsworth considered this love to be integral to the continuation of his home: “I, with many a fear/ For my dear Country, many heartfelt sighs,/ Amongst men who do not love her linger here.” Thus, it is the responsibility of the English citizen to value the rituals that have enabled the nation to survive and succeed for hundreds of years; the institutions of king and country are as unwavering as the stars themselves, and serve as shining guides of light for the rest of the European world.

However, the shift at the end adds a sense of skepticism that leaves readers wondering if the blessings bestowed by the gods will be enough to protect England from ensuing pandemonium; the uncertainty of the sonnet may very well speak to Wordsworth’s own uncertainty about the future of the nation. Indeed, we are left knowing that Wordsworth possessed “many a fear” for his beloved home, and the poem ends with an ominous image of the narrator still in France, “among men who do not love her.” This vagueness communicates the sense of trepidation felt by many in England and France at this time, and while it may not

effectively discredit the glories of England, it subtly demonstrates the flux of two countries whose time of peace failed to bring tranquility to its citizens.

**“There is a bondage which is worse to bear”**

Wordsworth’s portrayal of England as the reigning beacon of honorable nationhood appears in another one of the *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty*, only this poem investigates the impact of nationhood on the individual rather than the collective. “There is a bondage which is worse to bear” differentiates between physical and mental slavery, arguing that any nation attempting to unify the country whilst stifling the powers of the individual effectively enslaves its population. Wordsworth’s indirect references to France suggest that while both countries strove for the protection of freedom, France failed to procure genuine freedom because individuality was repressed in favor of *en masse* politicization:

There is a bondage which is worse to bear  
Than his who breathes, by roof, and floor, and wall,  
Pent in, a Tyrant’s solitary Thrall:  
‘Tis his who walks about in the open air,  
One of a Nation who, henceforth, must wear  
Their fetters in their Souls. For who could be,  
Who, even the best, in such condition, free  
From self-reproach, reproach which he must share  
With Human Nature? Never be it ours  
To see the Sun how brightly it will shine,  
And know that noble Feelings, manly Powers,  
Instead of gathering strength must droop and pine,  
And Earth with all her pleasant fruits and flowers  
Fade, and participate in Man’s decline.  
 (“There is a bondage which is worse to bear”)

The immediate assertion that there can be a suppression worse than imprisonment introduces the dichotomy between physical freedom and mental freedom, or in this specific poem, freedom of the soul. Wordsworth’s image of a single slave held captive by a tyrant inevitably alludes to Napoleon, which would assumedly associate physical oppression with the French nation; indeed, the contrast established in the introduction leads readers to assume that the “Nation” mentioned in the fifth line refers to England, and the establishment being criticized is the English

government. The phrase “never be it ours” (l. 9) reverses expectations and insinuates that the actual burden of guilt falls on France; this difficult and counterintuitive structure forces us to stop and think about who Wordsworth aims to criticize, and why he would do so in such a manner.

If we assume that Wordsworth meant for the possessive “ours” to refer to England, then there exist two possibilities for the overall criticism: the first associates physical oppression with England and mental oppression with France, and the second ascribes both physical and mental bondage to the French nation, with England being exempt from either wrongdoing. The most conclusive evidence, mainly possessive pronouns, supports the second explanation because its employment creates a sense of otherness that challenges the presumptively English “there.” For example, when talking about both physical and mental slavery, the narrator uses the possessive pronoun “his,” which feels oddly impersonal and places readers outside of the description as an observer. Furthermore, Wordsworth described the worst bondage to be “One of a Nation who, henceforth, must wear/ Their fetters in their Souls” with the possessive pronoun “their” being used twice and strongly contrasting the “ours” mentioned later in the poem. All of these minute details work in tandem to emphasize an “us vs. them” mentality within which England stands as the negation of individual oppression. However, the ambiguity of the language speaks to the difficulty of the polarizing issue; the universality of the diction suggests that freedom relies first and foremost on the individual, regardless of nationality, and to deny one’s integrity in the process of taking a stand acts as a type of slavery that goes against nature.

Although a concrete point of critique cannot be identified in terms of political policy or diplomatic error, the sonnet communicates a disdain for the decline addressed at the end of the poem that results in the decay of both human and natural resources. This waste cannot



necessarily be defined as complacency, but rather as an inability to act due to the “fettters” placed on the citizen’s soul. The repression of the individual proves worse than physical bondage because no man can be truly free from self-criticism; thus, the man “pent in” at the hands of a “Tyrant” expunges his conscience of guilt because he presumably acted on behalf of his own will, whereas the “Nation” fails to obtain freedom for the soul because he feels overwhelmed by both his own integrity and “Human Nature.” In other words, Wordsworth’s sonnet presents levels of freedom, with the core of the order relying on a freedom of the soul that enables one to strengthen their “noble Feelings” and “manly Powers.” Applying this thought to the political designations earlier ascribed to the sonnet, Wordsworth seemed to be critical of the French system which disabled individuality and made possible the dominance of one through the suppression of many. Even nature reproaches the fettered soul, and as human virtues “must droop and pine,” so too does the Earth “with all her pleasant fruits and flowers/ Fade, and participate in Man’s decline.” Clearly Wordsworth deemed the overall enslavement of both nation and citizen as entirely unnatural, which insinuates that a more successful country would need to find a balance between the two. The traditions glorified in Wordsworth’s ideal England relied on a mutually beneficial relationship between rural labor and independence that reared free-thinking, unfettered individuals who developed their “noble Feelings” and “manly Powers.” It seems ironic that he critiqued France for suppressing the individual when the Revolution itself was founded on the idea of a Republic; perhaps he viewed tradition itself to be the greatest difference between French and English definitions of individualism, with the English countryside of antiquity being the facilitator of the independence that so many men lived for.

**“Liberty”**

Separate from the *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty*, Wordsworth wrote another liberty-related poem much later in his life that investigates the most natural forms of human freedom through animal metaphors. The poem “Liberty” was originally composed in 1829 as part of the larger poem, “To A Friend,” which honored his friend Maria Jane Jewsbury for her gift of a goldfish to the Wordsworths. Fragments of this version of “Liberty” were rewritten as a separate poem between 1831 and 1835, intended to be a sequel to “To A Friend” instead of a section of it. The poem begins with a prose excerpt from seventeenth-century writer Abraham Cowley’s essay “Of Liberty,” written as part of his *Essays* between 1662 and 1667 and published posthumously in 1668. “Of Liberty” is the first essay in the volume and introduces the topic of all the subsequent essays: “the liberty of a private Man being Master of his own Time and Actions, as far as may consist with the Laws of God and of his Country... and to enquire what Estate of Life does best seat us in the Possession of it.”<sup>24</sup> Arthur Nethercot summarizes Cowley’s conclusion that “all the ‘great Dealers in this World’- the ambitious, the covetous, and the voluptuous- eventually sell their own liberty to achieve their desires, whereas true liberty is to be found only in a life of ‘moderate plenty.’”<sup>25</sup> Wordsworth’s “Liberty” quotes the opening lines of Cowley’s essay:

The liberty of a people consists in being governed by laws which they have made themselves, under whatsoever form it be of government; the liberty of a private man in being master of his own time and actions, as far as may consist with the laws of God and of his country. Of this latter only we are here to discourse...

(“Liberty” in *Last Poems*, p. 205)

This excerpt encourages readers to interpret fish imagery in the poem as a metaphor for man, and to analyze the poem more specifically as a dialogue on the “liberty of a private man” in the context of God’s laws. Wordsworth then expounds on this idea and suggests that a truly free individual exercises moderation within their own natural environment, and

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<sup>24</sup> Abraham Cowley, *Essays*, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur H. Nethercot, “Abraham Cowley’s *Essays*,” p. 117.

to place oneself in a superficial space (either through luxury or forced confinement) limits the scope of one's liberty.

Wordsworth first applauds a life of moderation when reflecting that the fish are better suited in their natural habitat rather than the grand trappings of the fish bowl. The narrator asserts that even though the reflections of the "bauble prison" may make the eyes of the fish gleam, the splendor of their surroundings is artificial and unbeneficial to the animals:

They pined, perhaps, they languished while they shone;  
And, if not so, what matters beauty gone  
And admiration lost, by change of place  
That brings to the inward creature no disgrace?  
But if the change restore his birthright, then,  
Whate'er the difference, boundless is the gain.  
Who can divine what impulses from God  
Reach the caged Lark, within a town-abode,  
From his poor inch or two of daisied sod?  
O yield him back his privilege! No sea  
Swells like the bosom of a man set free;  
A wilderness is rich with liberty.

("Liberty" ll. 21-32, in *Last Poems* p. 206)

We may never know how the bird longs to react so long as he remains caged in his "town-abode" of "daisied sod"; the freedom to act impulsively and as one chooses to is denied when we restrict animals (or ourselves) to synthetic spaces. While beauty may not be antithetical to freedom, Wordsworth implies that extravagance confines the "birthright" of liberty because it forces one to act against their own natural impulses, just as Cowley contested in "Of Liberty" that men of greed sacrifice their personal liberty for wealth and become enslaved to luxury. Even though one could argue that men become avaricious because they cannot conquer their impulsiveness, Wordsworth uses impulse here as a synonym for instinct, and he argues that true liberty cannot exist if we are unable to act on our own accord, uninfluenced by materiality.

The poem's focus on natural instinct as an element of true liberty may help to explain Wordsworth's utilization of nature images, and he suggests that habitation is vital

to the utmost fulfilment of freedom. After moving the gold and silver fish from their “crystal dome” to a nearby pool, the narrator contemplates how their freedom to move and act as fish had been restricted when they were in a habitat inorganic to aquatic life:

I ask what warrant fixed them (like a spell  
Of witchcraft fixed them) in the crystal Cell;  
To wheel with languid motion round and round,  
Beautiful, yet in a mournful durance bound.  
Their peace, perhaps, our lightest footfall marred;  
On their quick sense our sweetest music jarred;  
And whither could they dart, if seized with fear?  
No sheltering stone, no tangled root was near.  
When fire or taper ceased to cheer the room,  
They wore away the night in starless gloom;  
And, when the sun first dawned upon the streams,  
How faint their portion of his vital beams!  
Thus, and unable to complain, they fared,  
While not one joy of ours by them was shared.  
(“Liberty” ll. 46-59, in *Last Poems* p. 206-207)

The fish are incapable of swimming freely, or even hiding if they feel frightened because the material space does not accommodate the needs of the animals. Wordsworth implies that every creature has their own world of experiences, instincts, and emotions, and human attempts to harbor the fish in a grand bowl ultimately liken the fish to prisoners “in the crystal Cell” because they were not created to enjoy the same surroundings as man. The narrator later admits that any caged bird “though sure of plaudits on his costly stage,/ Though fed with dainties from the snow-white hand/ Of a kind Mistress, fairest of the land,/ But gladly would escape” (ll. 63-66).

Considering these animals as metaphors for men, Wordsworth argues that humans are best suited for a moderate lifestyle in our natural environment, an environment whose hardiness allows men to fortify their inborn liberty.

Wordsworth suggests that no man lives a life of truer liberty than the poet himself, specifically because poets possess the ability to find inspiration from the simplest of natural surroundings. He asserts:

But most the Bard is true to inborn right,

Lark of the dawn, and Philomel of the night,  
 Exults in freedom, can with rapture vouch  
 For the dear blessings of a lowly couch,  
 A natural meal- days, months, from Nature's hand;  
 Time, place, and business, all at his command!  
 Who bends to happier duties, who more wise  
 Than the industrious Poet, taught to prize,  
 Above all grandeur, a pure life uncrossed  
 By cares in which simplicity is lost?  
 That life- the flowery path which winds by stealth,  
 Which Horace needed for his spirit's health;  
 Sighed for, in heart and genius, overcome  
 By noise and strife, and questions wearisome,  
 And the vain splendors of Imperial Rome?  
 ("Liberty" ll. 81-95, in *Last Poems* p. 207)

Even though Wordsworth may not propose that all men should be poets to embrace the most honest forms of freedom, his poem does indicate that living a pure, simplistic life allows men to "[exult] in freedom" rather than to be "overcome/ By noise and strife, and... vain splendors" (ll. 83, 94-95). Therefore, his approval of English rural labors may be due to his perception that they were likely to praise a life "above all grandeur" (l. 89); to protect the lifestyles of those who Wordsworth believed embodied the purest form of English life thus equated to protecting the natural surroundings that facilitated unoppressed living and humility. Liberty exists in this poem not only as an innate possession within every creature, but also as a potentially corruptible force that relies on humble surroundings and moderation to reach its greatest potential.

### ***The Prelude***

Wordsworth's final thoughts on liberty can be found in the posthumous 1850 publication of *The Prelude*, wherein he reflects on how the tests of life require the individual to constantly reevaluate their own freedom. Wordsworth intended for the poem, first completed in 1805, to be the introduction to a three-part epic, *The Recluse*, and it discloses the development of the poet's mind from childhood into adulthood. Revised for the rest of his life, *The Prelude* stands as his final word on a range of topics, but he focuses three entire books on his time spent in France and his disillusionment with republicanism. Significantly, Wordsworth verifies the change in his

political affiliations throughout the poem, with one famous apostrophe in the 1850 edition praising Edmund Burke and the conservative reservations towards radicalism that he outlined in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Gone were the days where Wordsworth felt guided by the patriotic gleam of enlightenment and republicanism; by the time of his death Wordsworth revered Burke as a spokesman for quintessentially English philosophies that stood firmer than the oak tree used to describe him. Liberty for both was perceived as a privilege, and its overindulgence would result in a disorderly nation void of morality and truth.

The apostrophe to Burke sets the stage for Wordsworth's later descriptions of liberty as a force that requires constant flux within the individual. Wordsworth mentions Burke explicitly in Book VII of *The Prelude*, a book dedicated to the city of London; readers feel a constant state of disorder throughout this section due to the vividness and overabundance of the imagery, which destabilizes our perceptions and prompts us to long for a sense of steadiness that Wordsworth provides through Burke's reference. He exclaims:

Genius of Burke! forgive the pen seduced  
By precious wonders, and too slow to tell  
Of what the ingenuous, what bewildered men,  
Beginning to mistrust their boastful guides,  
And wise men, willing to grow wiser, caught,  
Rapt auditors! from thy most eloquent tongue-  
Now mute, for ever mute in the cold grave.  
I see him, -old, but vigorous in age,-  
Stand like an oak whose stag-horn branches start  
Out of its leafy brow, the more to awe  
The younger brethren of the grove.  
(1850 *Prelude*, VII, ll. 512-522, *Fourteen-Book Prelude* p. 151)

Wordsworth offered Burke an apology for his denunciation of *Reflections on the Revolution*, alluded to in his unpublished 1793 *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, contributing his error to a lack of reservation that disabled foresight. The word “seduced” adds a licentious quality to the republican movement which is then counteracted with the phrase “precious wonders,” which creates a sense of confusion that mirrors the bewilderment Wordsworth may have felt at the time.

The uncertainty created by the conflicting language at the beginning of the segment incites a need for stability that appears with the image of Burke described from a distance; as the narration shifts from addressing Burke in the second-person to the third-person, a more prominent figure emerges and assuages the reader's sense of unsteadiness. Wordsworth's comparison presents Burke, and thus his conservatism, to be so essentially English that it becomes part of the landscape itself. His perceptions of liberty, rooted deeply in English earth both literally and figuratively, bring comfort and security to the nation through their unwavering survival.

The conclusion from Book XIV of the *Prelude* addresses the irony of Wordsworth's praise of tradition despite his own political transformation; his contemplations argue that the change of political opinion represents personal growth, and those who remain uninhibited enough to consider different perspectives embody true freedom:

Oh! who is he that hath his whole life long  
 Preserved, enlarged, this freedom in himself?  
 For this alone is genuine liberty:  
 Where is the favoured being who hath held  
 That course unchecked, unerring, and untired,  
 In one perpetual progress smooth and bright?-  
 A humbler destiny have we retraced,  
 And told of lapse and hesitating choice,  
 And backward wanderings along thorny ways:  
 Yet- compassed round by mountain solitudes,  
 Within whose solemn temple I received  
 My earliest visitations, careless then  
 Of what was given me; and which now I range,  
 A meditative, oft a suffering man-  
 (1850 *Prelude*, XIV, ll. 130-143, in *Fourteen-Book Prelude* p. 261)

This reflective passage humanizes the journey of the individual, creating a space for error that denounces rigid systems of belief. The beginning of the segment may be considered problematic since it suggests that genuine liberty cannot be attained; however, that may very well be the point Wordsworth tries to make in this passage. Liberty as a theory never wavers, providing each man with the freedom to act or think without restriction; and yet, when this theory gets applied to

mankind, we discover “a humbler destiny” that requires “perpetual progress” rather than lifelong adherence. Wordsworth recognized the difficulty in preserving constant liberty because no man lives life unhindered by some political, economic, or spiritual barrier; his final description of liberty brings his musings down from the theoretical domain and into the material world, allowing readers to understand his journey as one that wandered through thorny ways towards illumination. However, throughout all of the man’s hesitations, nature exists as a stable influence, facilitating the visitations of divine thought which prompt us to reevaluate just how freely we live our lives.

The influence of nature cannot be stressed enough in Wordsworth’s understanding of liberty; it fosters his appreciation for the individual, it embodies the traditions of the nation, and it survives amidst the chaos of humanity. Wordsworth’s praises of Burke become far more meaningful when considering his final passage on liberty in *The Prelude*; by comparing him to the natural world, Wordsworth likened Burke to the pillars of inspiration that provide stability to a humankind constantly in motion. However, for all that can be said for Wordsworth’s humane, honest perceptions of liberty in *The Prelude*, scholars may dub this philosophy as problematic when considering the abolitionist debate; the impossibility of knowing where to draw the line between avoidance and neglect presents itself as a difficult setback when analyzing poetry with slave tropes. In simpler terms, does the poet, unintentionally or knowingly, create a limited perception of freedom that cannot be applied to all men? The first two sections of this work have shown how and why Wordsworth analyzed property as a necessary facilitator of liberty and how that meaning of liberty became rooted in English conservative traditions, but the final portion investigates how he grappled with these notions of land and freedom when man himself was the property to be owned.



## Section III: Colonial Emancipation and Wordsworth's Gradualism

### Background: Abolitionist and Romantic Circles

Before understanding the political climate in which the letter to Dockray was written, we must understand the key elements of the abolitionist movement that developed before and during Wordsworth's life. The practice of colonial slavery acted as a large economic profit for England, and Seymour Drescher argues in *British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* that the colonial plantations in the Caribbean were vital to the development of the British Empire because their "specialized production was of undisputed value in the imperial system."<sup>26</sup> Despite the expansion of abolitionist groups in England in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century, a sharp increase in colonial planter profits combatted any official attempts to put legislation into action that limited the slave trade. Business could not have been better, and when this influx of profit occurred simultaneously with national criticism of liberal politics in France, conservative parliamentarians were heavily inclined to vote down abolitionist legislature. The governmental opposition to radicalism was exemplified by Parliament's 1795 "Treasonable Practices" and "Seditious Meetings" Acts, both of which limited the size of public meetings and criminalized attempts to change the established order of church and state.<sup>27</sup> By the end of 1795, English politicians argued for social stability in order to avoid the chaos enveloping France following Napoleon's overthrow of Robespierre; as a result, expanded platforms for abolitionist thought declined despite the efforts of Wordsworth's Romantic contemporaries and close friends, Robert Southey and Samuel Coleridge.

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<sup>26</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*, p. 45.

Wordsworth met both Southey and Coleridge in 1795; these two friendships would have exposed Wordsworth to abolitionist philosophy and emancipatory thought, but furthermore these influences suggest the conscious ambiguity Wordsworth maintained when discussing the slave trade later in his own work. Robert Southey published nine anti-slavery poems by 1797, most notably his “To the Genius of Africa” that denounced as blasphemy the selling of human beings as commodities. This poem alludes to Coleridge’s 1795 “Lecture on the Slave Trade” which condemned the moral degradation of slave traffickers and criticized the social and political negligence of the British government for permitting the expansion of the trade.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Coleridge established a nationalistic anti-slave trade platform in the 1798 publication of his “Fears in Solitude.” This poem notably was published the same year that Wordsworth and Coleridge published their *Lyrical Ballads*, and while we cannot speculate on whether or not the pair discussed the poem, Wordsworth’s contemporaries were clearly developing their abolitionist platforms while maintaining friendships with him.

Wordsworth’s longtime relationship with Thomas Clarkson would extend the discussion on slavery beyond Romantic poetry into the political sphere at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thomas Clarkson was one of the leaders of the abolitionist campaign, and helped form the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade with Granville Sharpe and William Wilberforce. Wordsworth met Clarkson in 1799 after getting settled at Grasmere and they sustained a relationship as Clarkson had a house in nearby Eusmere; likewise, an intense friendship would be developed between Clarkson’s wife, Catherine, and William’s sister, Dorothy, and the pair sent hundreds of letters to each other in the subsequent decades.<sup>29</sup> However, a rift between the men developed during the Westmorland election in 1818 when Wordsworth campaigned for the

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<sup>28</sup> Chine Sonoi, “Coleridge and the British Slave Trade.”

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life*, p. 164.

Lowther brothers, sons of his Tory patron Lord Lonsdale, rather than for the radical challenger Henry Brougham (who had helped pass the Abolition Bill). A subsequent letter to Clarkson in 1824 following a period of revived opposition to slavery reveals the turning of political tides for Wordsworth, as he coldly declined Clarkson's request for him to circulate anti-slavery papers in the Lakes. Ronald Tetreault argues that "despite their friendship, the two men were natural opponents. Though they maintained a respect and even some affection for one another, they were wedded to rival outlooks. Enthusiasm and restraint, eagerness for reform and patient faith were the conflicting ideals of Clarkson and Wordsworth."<sup>30</sup>

The passing of the 1832 Reform Act was one final event that encouraged Wordsworth's support of colonial planters in the 1833 letter. Drafted while the Whigs held power in Parliament, the Act was introduced by Prime Minister Lord Grey and effectively removed seats from the small electorates dominated by wealthy patrons while also expanding the electorate. As a result, more men were eligible to vote and the Whigs retained power to potentially pass numerous acts of liberal legislation, one of which was the Slavery Abolition Act. Prior to its passing, Wordsworth harbored extreme anxiety for the future of the country under a Whig governmental majority, and as Parliament commenced the process of transforming the nation, Wordsworth's conservative loyalties were exacerbated by a perceived upheaval of British identity.

Thus, by 1832 Wordsworth adopted increasingly traditionalist attitudes that encouraged him to protect the sanctity of his homeland. The passing of the 1832 Reform Bill as a result of the Whig Party's ascension to power allowed for both the emancipation of Catholics and slaves in the British colonies; Wordsworth felt obligated to entreat God's forgiveness for the authors of the Bill, writing that they had "already gone so far towards committing a greater political crime

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<sup>30</sup> Tetreault, "Wordsworth on Enthusiasm," p. 58.

than any recorded in History.”<sup>31</sup> Despite extended exposure to radical abolitionist thought from friendships with Southey, Coleridge, and Clarkson, Wordsworth’s intrinsic affiliations with rationality, sense, and familiarity distanced him philosophically from his Romantic contemporaries at an early age; by the time he writes to Dockray in 1833 his love of nation surpassed his support for abolition.

### **Problematic Slave Tropes and Anti-Interference Philosophy**

For most of Wordsworth’s life, slavery and the abolitionist debate remained relevant topics that sparked national discussion. Although slavery on English soil remained illegal, the spoils of the triangular trade route between Great Britain, Africa, and the West Indies comprised almost 80% of Britain’s foreign income by 1783.<sup>32</sup> Anti-slavery campaigns took shape in the late 1780s with the rise of the Quakers and the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. In 1792, William Wilberforce brought a bill calling for abolition to Parliament, which was struck down and replaced by Tory Foreign Minister Lord Melville’s installation of many acts of gradual abolition that effectively delayed total abolition for the British colonies. Abolitionist efforts would be thwarted by the French Revolution, as its associations with French republicanism and British radicals reduced support from the public. The end of the slave trade would come in 1807 with the Slave Trade Act, but this legislation only prohibited the slave trade in the British Empire; total emancipation of slaves in the British colonies occurred nearly thirty years later with the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.

Connections between Wordsworth and the abolitionist debate can be made beyond the fact that he lived during those historical events. Wordsworth’s 1791 trip to France exposed him

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<sup>31</sup> Letter to Lord Lonsdale, 24 February 1832. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: Vol. 5: The Later Years, Part II*, p. 455.

<sup>32</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Campaigner*, p. 119.

to and enchanted him with republican ideals, such as the abolition of slavery. His later aversions to Napoleon may have influenced his knowledge of abolitionist discussions due to Bonaparte's reinstitution of slavery in the French colonies in 1802. He devoted one of his 1807 *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty* to Toussaint L'Ouverture after the Haitian revolt leader died in a French prison in 1803. Furthermore, Wordsworth maintained a close friendship with Thomas Clarkson throughout his life, even writing a poem in his honor after the Slave Trade Act's passing in 1807. All of these associations suggest that Wordsworth not only was aware of the abolitionist movement, but that he had personal connections to those political developments in the early nineteenth century. However, his opinions on the matter are rarely made explicit in his poetry or prose, and while this may be an intentional device used with poetic license, certain discrepancies between his descriptions of liberty and his descriptions of slaves prove problematic and deserve further investigation.

### **“To Toussaint L'Ouverture”**

Composed in the tumultuous year 1802 and published as one of the *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty*, Wordsworth's “To Toussaint L'Ouverture” reflects on the death of the Haitian revolutionary leader, but its ambiguous depictions of L'Ouverture fail to effectively praise his efforts. L'Ouverture amassed attention for his leadership in the Haitian Rebellion, which was inspired by the French Revolution and took place in 1789; his political and military acumen helped the colonists to transform the slave rebellion into a revolution, and by 1800 Saint Domingue had become the first free colonial society which rejected race as a basis for social ranking. He fought on multiple sides for various wars, but distinguished himself as the Governor-General for life, and led the revolt against Napoleon after slavery was reinstated in the colony in 1802. L'Ouverture's capture and subsequent death in France reignited abolitionist debate, and

Wordsworth's sonnet dedicated to him would be published in the same year that the slave trade was abolished in Great Britain. "To Toussaint L'Ouverture" links foundations of imaginative freedom to British nationalism, and the ambivalent diction within the poem embodies a conscious disregard of the realities of slavery in England. Mary Persyn argues that the poet formulated this "Wordsworthian sublime" by turning "away from the recognition of material slavery and bondage and toward an imaginative freedom nationed [sic] specifically English."<sup>33</sup> The obscure language in the sonnet alludes to a gradual process of emancipation that delays any immediate or tangible freedom, and the poet presents a somewhat imbalanced image of L'Ouverture that leaves readers unsure of Wordsworth's personal opinion on the effectiveness of the abolitionist cause.

The sonnet directly addresses L'Ouverture in the first line, but the conflicting language places him in a liminal space between freedom and oppression that creates tension and fails to effectively praise his efforts. The narrator exclaims:

Toussaint, the most unhappy Man of Men!  
Whether the rural Milk-Maid by her Cow  
Sing in thy hearing, or thy liest now  
Alone in some deep dungeon's earless den,  
O miserable Chieftain! Where and when  
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou  
Wear rather in thy bonds a chearful brow:  
Though fallen Thyself, never to rise again,  
Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind  
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;  
There's not a breathing of the common wind  
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;  
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,  
And love, and Man's unconquerable mind.  
(*"To Toussaint L'Ouverture"*)

Notably, Wordsworth referred to L'Ouverture as a man, which lends some credit to a positive treatment of the figure; however, the phrase "most unhappy" sets the bleak tone and immediately

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Kelly Persyn, "The Sublime Turn Away from Empire: Wordsworth's Encounter with Colonial Slavery, 1802," p. 2.

sets up the dichotomy that continues throughout the poem. A pastoral image represents freedom in the second line, which seems problematic considering that the rural land that L'Ouverture had known was the same land he would have worked on as a slave. The word "whether" at the beginning of the line suggests a contrast that will be followed by a uniting phrase, but instead the clause ends with "O miserable Chieftain," which indicates a misery that exists regardless of location. The effusively dejected tone of the poem denies autonomy to the man it addresses, and furthermore attributes Wordsworth with a problematic superiority, as if he looks down on the scene and pities L'Ouverture without realizing his own condescension. Both adjectives "miserable" and "unhappy" discredit any attempts to honor the man in the sonnet, and the question posed at the middle of the work insinuates that he never had patience in his lifetime. Readers are conditioned to expect either a sharp contrasting image of power or the continuation of misery in the second half of the sonnet with the shifting answer to the question; however, the ambiguous comforts that are exalted leave readers unsatisfied and doubtful about Wordsworth's complimentary attitude. Furthermore, the confusing shift between tenses makes the poem difficult to understand as we struggle to determine if the poem addresses L'Ouverture in the present ("do thou"), or future ("wilt thou"). All of these discrepancies devalue any glorifying aspects of the language and seem to communicate an uncertainty that mirrors Wordsworth's own views on the emancipation debate.

The sonnet's indeterminate presentation of L'Ouverture extends further autonomy to the "powers" that supposedly will comfort him and carry on his work after death; while the nature imagery attributes a universal characteristic to his legacy, a realistic interpretation of the sonnet forces us to consider how defective the sonnet is in providing a definitive answer to the abolition problem. Wordsworth interfused Toussaint with earthly elements to associate his legacy with

permanence or subsistence; however, the lack of reference to men essentially leaves the destiny of the abolitionist movement up to impalpable forces. While credit must be extended to Wordsworth's attempt to liken L'Ouverture with great entities such as the earth and sky, one must wonder how the trees or the clouds would instigate social or political change in their nineteenth-century world. Enslaved Africans would probably take little comfort in knowing that the wind will never forget them, or that they have allies in "exultations" and "agonies." The language presumably attempts to weave L'Ouverture into the fabric of mankind, but the lack of dialogue on how his death will initiate change poses a major problem in our interpretations of the poem's effectiveness.

Overall, the poem reads as an endeavor to praise Toussaint L'Ouverture and liken the power of his impact to the greatest forces of nature; and yet, the evasion of historical events presents the struggle for emancipation as something fantastical and unattainable in the real world. Despite the idyllic image of L'Ouverture being forever remembered by "Man's unconquerable mind," the sonnet fails to suggest a definitive stance on the abolitionist debate. The ambiguousness that flows throughout may be the result of Wordsworth's own uncertainty, or even of the dangers faced when writing explicitly in favor of a revolutionary ex-slave; either way, none of the references in the text suggest that a substantial change in the institution of slavery will be brought on by L'Ouverture's death. Instead, readers are left with the choice of waiting for larger forces to instigate a change, and even if the mind of man truly remains unconquered, the bodies of some men continue to wear their bonds with an assumedly uncheerful brow.

**"To Thomas Clarkson"**



However opaque Wordsworth's earlier poems may appear, his "To Thomas Clarkson" profusely praises the abolitionist leader for his attempts to eradicate the slave trade in Great Britain. Published as part of the second volume of the 1807 *Poems in Two Volumes*, this would be one of the last pieces that Wordsworth would write before the release of his collection; Wordsworth noted beneath the title that the poem was written "On the final passing of the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, March, 1807," and fact that he included this work in a book published the same year speaks to the momentousness of the occasion. The sonnet applauds Clarkson's exhaustive efforts in reigniting the abolitionist campaign amidst the Napoleonic Wars and gaining support from members of Parliament. Wordsworth's affection may in part be influenced by his close friendship with Clarkson, and the variation in tone between "To Toussaint L'Ouverture" and "To Thomas Clarkson" can potentially be due to their different racial identities. Ronald Tetreault argues that early signs of fissure between Wordsworth and Clarkson can be seen in his sonnet as it expressed a hope that Clarkson would "settle into a peaceful old age" despite the fact that "repose was not Clarkson's natural posture."<sup>34</sup> Regardless, the explicitness of the diction pushes Wordsworth over to the more pro-abolitionist side of the debate spectrum, distinguishing the sonnet as one of the less problematic of those that grapple with themes of emancipation and slavery.

Unlike "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," the language addressing Clarkson leaves little room for doubt and presents his struggle to ratify emancipation as a worthy cause. Although Wordsworth never explicitly mentions slavery in the sonnet, he alludes to the debate and applauded Clarkson's relentless efforts:

Clarkson! it was an obstinate Hill to climb;  
How toilsome, nay how dire it was, by Thee  
Is known,—by none, perhaps, so feelingly;

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<sup>34</sup> Tetreault, "Wordsworth on Enthusiasm," p. 56.

But Thou, who, starting in thy fervent prime,  
 Didst first lead forth this pilgrimage sublime,  
 Hast heard the constant Voice its charge repeat,  
 Which, out of thy young heart's oracular seat,  
 First roused thee.—O true yoke-fellow of Time  
 With unabating effort, see, the palm  
 Is won, and by all Nations shall be worn!  
 The bloody Writing is for ever torn,  
 And Thou henceforth shalt have a good Man's calm,  
 A great Man's happiness; thy zeal shall find  
 Repose at length, firm Friend of human kind!  
 (“To Thomas Clarkson”)

Words such as “dire” and “toilsome” suggest the difficulty of the fight to abolish the slave trade, and the image of Clarkson climbing a hill strengthens the notion that his accomplishment required ample labor. However, Wordsworth suggested that Clarkson not only exerted physical energy, but internalized the struggle by becoming emotionally invested in the cause. Unlike the dejected depiction of L’Overture, Clarkson emerges as energetic and ardent, and Wordsworth even used the word “lead” to stress his role as an enthusiastic guide. Furthermore, readers are assured that Clarkson’s efforts have impacted the future of humanity; unlike L’Overture, who Wordsworth associated with natural forces such as wind and earth, Clarkson gets connected with human sensations, even being described as a “firm Friend of human kind.” We feel certain that Clarkson impacted physical people, and his zealous personality in life warrants assurance, rather than the uncertainty far more prevalent in “To Toussaint L’Overture.” The difference in attitudes towards the two figures reveals a subtle prejudice that may be elucidated by the patriotic implications of the sonnet itself.

Wordsworth’s perceptions of freedom are defined in purely English terms, and he only speaks definitively on the issue when it is legitimized by the British nation. Firstly, his insinuation that Clarkson “lead first this pilgrimage sublime” discredits the efforts of other emancipatory leaders such as L’Overture but additionally adds a religious connotation to Clarkson’s victory with a reference to palm leaves; this reference could possibly allude to Palm

Sunday as the people of Jerusalem laid palm leaves down to represent victory, or the Greek tradition of Nike's palm leaf as a symbol for peace. The powerful "Voice" which rouses Clarkson to action seems to appear as a moral guide, and the implication that England's efforts were guided by the divine reminds readers of the same image presented in "Composed on the Sea-Side near Calais," which intimated Wordsworth's perceptions of his nation as one chosen and consecrated by the gods. Overall, the poem effectively praises Clarkson but readers are inclined to believe that these praises are inextricably linked to a national bias; Wordsworth's ambiguous language in "To Toussaint L'Ouverture" seems more problematic when compared to this sonnet, and the fight for freedom described here as a "pilgrimage sublime" seems all the less worthy when fought by any nation but England.

### **"September 1<sup>st</sup> 1802"**

The most explicitly racialized of Wordsworth's *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty*, "September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1802" recounts his interaction with a Negro woman who attempted to immigrate to Great Britain during the 1802 peace between England and France. As indicated by the title, the sonnet was composed in September of 1802, three days after the Wordsworths left Calais and sailed back to Dover. The poem, originally published in *The Morning Post* in February of 1803 under the title "The Banished Negroes," would be revised throughout most of Wordsworth's life; the final 1845 edition appeared as "September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1802," with a headnote added in 1827 that stated "Among the capricious acts of tyranny that disgraced those times, was the chasing of all Negroes from France by decree of the government: we had a Fellow passenger who was one of the expelled." The most significant revisions are made to the 1827 edition, with the final 1845 sonnet containing only one identical line to the earlier copy. Both versions portray the racialized figure as a symbol of otherness, and her silence separates the Negro woman from the narrator,

even though that silence can be interpreted as either a strength or a weakness. Judith Page argues in *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women* that while the presentation of the woman may possibly evoke the European stereotype of the noble savage, it more likely depicts “a figure who will not be shaped or contained by the poet’s desire,” a black woman who repels exploitation by convention or patriarchal attitudes.<sup>35</sup> Analyzing the implications of Wordsworth’s revisions allows us to more distinctly decipher the ambiguous quality of his later writing, but furthermore recognize certain points of progression in the trajectory of his stance on abolition.

Unlike the more defeated descriptions of the woman in the 1827 version, Wordsworth’s final 1845 edition allows space for hope and a more positive reading of the figure as a symbol for strength. The adoption of white imagery sanctifies the woman, and Wordsworth inclines readers to interpret her as a kind of fallen angel:

**1827 Edition:**

We had a fellow-Passenger who came  
From Calais with us, gaudy in array,  
A Negro Woman like a Lady gay,  
Yet silent as a woman fearing blame;  
Dejected, meek, yea pitiably tame,  
She sate, from notice turning not away,  
    (“Sept. 1, 1802,” ll. 1-6)

**1845 Edition:**

We had a female Passenger who came  
From Calais with us, spotless in array,--  
A white-robed Negro, like a lady gay,  
Yet downcast as a woman fearing blame;  
Meek, destitute, as seemed, of hope or aim  
She sate, from notice turning not away,  
    (“Sept. 1, 1802,” ll. 1-6)

The shift from “fellow-Passenger” to “female Passenger” discourages a sense of unification between the narrator and the figure, which may be problematic but also could suggest the woman’s ascension above the rest of the party. This interpretation is strengthened by the revision “spotless in array,” which associates her with a sense of sacredness; the 1845 edition portrays the woman in a white robe, evoking angelic images of purity that strongly contrast her “gaudy” appearance in the earlier publication. Wordsworth changed “silent” to “downcast,” which lessens the burden of guilt that readers associate with the fear of blame: we assume that the woman’s

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<sup>35</sup> Judith Page, *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women*, p. 73.

silence comes from culpability, whereas the phrase “downcast” intimates a hopelessness that may stem from her oppression. The revision helps emphasize the woman’s autonomy, and the subsequent diction affords the Negro a greater intentionality, suggesting that she merely appears weakened by her oppression rather than “dejected” or “pitifully tame” by nature.

While Wordsworth’s revisions in the first half of the sonnet offer a more powerful reading of the Negro woman, his second-half revisions attempt to transcend political culpability which makes his statement on the slave issue far more universal and problematic. Any sense of definiteness that exists in the earlier version disappears, and Wordsworth presents a far broader image that reminds readers of the generality in “To Toussaint L’Ouverture.” The lack of specificity in the later version portrays abolitionist reform as an abstract idea rather than a feasible construct, with divine intervention being the only source of authority capable of administering change:

**1827 Edition:**

But on our proffered kindness still did lay  
A weight of languid speech, or at the same  
Was silent, motionless in eyes and face.  
She was a Negro Woman driv’n from France,  
Rejected like all others of that race,  
Not one of whom may now find footing there;  
This the poor Out-cast did to us declare,  
Nor murmured at the unfeeling Ordinance.  
 (“Sept. 1, 1802,” ll. 7-14)

**1845 Edition:**

But on all proffered intercourse did lay  
A weight of languid speech, or to the same  
No sign of answer made by word or face:  
Yet still her eyes retained their tropic fire,  
That, burning independent of the mind,  
Joined with the lustre of her rich attire  
To mock the Outcast. –O ye Heavens, be kind!  
And feel, thou Earth, for this afflicted Race!  
 (“Sept. 1, 1802,” ll. 7-14)

The 1827 edition presents readers with an image positioned in a distinct historical context (“driv’n from France”) which solidifies our understanding of the poem as a reaction to or criticism of a certain event. While poetry itself does not require reference to a specific moment, the increased ambiguity of the 1845 edition’s setting relieves France of its guilt in legalizing such an “unfeeling Ordinance” that rejected “all others of that race.”

Just as Wordsworth erases the phrase “not one of whom may now find footing there,” readers struggle to place a foothold in the material world when reading the 1845 edition.

Wordsworth removes the narrator almost entirely from the scene itself, modifying the word “our” to “all,” which adds to the universal nature of the later edition. While he contrasts her “languid speech” with a strength of “tropic fire” in her eyes, Wordsworth also associates that strength with an emotionality separate from the mind; the derisiveness of this description seems emphasized by the narrator’s assumption that the passion in her eyes, “joined with the lustre of her rich attire” ridicules or derides the woman herself. Though this phrase may attempt to elicit sympathy in readers by suggesting that the woman’s immense feelings and fine clothes “mock” or are paradoxical to her oppressive situation, the subsequent appeal to the Heavens reads almost condescendingly as the narrator asks the Heavens to “be kind!”

We are left with a sense of uncertainty when analyzing the revisions to “September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1802.” While the increasingly universal language initially associates the Negro woman with sacredness and purity, the extension of collective diction to the latter half of the poem denies any call for immediate action or retribution for the sufferings of the oppressed African population. Wordsworth instead ascribes authority to the Heavens, begging for kindness and feeling on behalf of the “afflicted race.” Like in “To Toussaint L’Ouvverture,” his ambivalent handling of race here seems insufficient in providing a definitive answer to the problem he presents; however, the final revisions to this poem occur in 1845, twelve years after the abolition of slaves in the British colonies, which may help to explain his retreat from explicitly political language. Overall, this poem’s revisions show Wordsworth’s increasingly abstract interpretation of racialized issues, and leave readers wondering how he responded more directly to the slave question itself.

**“Humanity”**

While the inspiration for “Humanity” came from an imaginative scenario, the poem nonetheless addresses the issue of slavery openly, investigating the long-term effects of slavery on the integrity of humanity. Original portions of the poem appear in the earlier “To a Friend,” but after Mary Wordsworth suggested that the poem was unwieldy, Wordsworth divided “To A Friend” into two separate poems, “Liberty” and “Humanity.” As previously mentioned, all three poems were written in 1829 after Wordsworth was gifted a goldfish by Maria Jewsbury, with “To a Friend” honoring Jewsbury, “Liberty” contemplating the most natural forms of freedom, and “Humanity” asserting the interconnectedness of all creatures with humanity. Although “Humanity” argues that peace and love be bestowed to all beings, its calls for self-restraint and providential interference expand Wordsworth’s conservative platform by supporting abolition on an individual basis rather than as a result of widespread reform.

Wordsworth’s reliance on providence, with god or nature providing and protecting through spiritual care, encourages him to see corruption as a product of overindulgence; in “Humanity” he wrote: “What a fair World were ours for Verse to paint,/ If power could live at ease with self-restraint! Opinion bow before the naked sense/ Of the greatest vision, -faith in providence;/ Merciful over all existence, just/ To the least particle of sentient dust” (ll. 42-46). In this system, man, inspired by the equality of God, attempts to enforce the same parity in his own life. For Wordsworth, abolition would come as an organic result of each man recognizing the limitations of his own knowledge and placing his faith in a higher power that will bring justice to everything in due time:

Then Genius, shunning fellowship with Pride,  
Would braid his golden locks at Wisdom’s side;  
Love ebb and flow untroubled by caprice,  
And not alone *harsh* tyranny would cease,  
But unoffending creatures find release  
From *qualified* oppression, whose defence  
Rests on a hollow plea of recompence;  
Thought-tempered wrongs, for each humane respect

Oft worse to bear, or deadlier in effect.  
 Witness those glances of indignant scorn  
 From some high-minded Slave, impelled to spurn  
 The kindness that would make him less forlorn;  
 Or, if the soul to bondage be subdued,  
 His look of pitiable gratitude!  
 ("Humanity" ll. 56-69, in *Last Poems* p. 212)

Wordsworth's idyllic depiction of humanity can be problematic when considering his belief that man's inaction would eventually lead to freedom; many abolitionists would argue that it wasn't enough to be anti-slave, one must be pro-abolition. This passage suggests that once men separate their intelligence from their pride and instead trust in Providence, "not alone *harsh* tyranny would cease,/ But unoffending creatures find release/ From *qualified* oppression" (ll. 59-61); the word "qualified" probably means "limited" or "incomplete," which implies that all forms of oppression would be eradicated. Wordsworth attempts to denounce human slavery by arguing that its defense relies on "a hollow plea of recompense," or a demand for slave owners to be reimbursed for their monetary losses; however, the slave references here are ambiguous, and may simply be referencing any person who remains oppressed by their own pride. This reading makes the last three lines far less problematic, as Wordsworth suggests that men would be gratified by the soul's release from oppression. And yet, Wordsworth utilized the slave figure when writing this poem in 1829, four years before the Abolition Act, which demands at least some consideration of the phrase as a direct reference to slavery. Either way, his references become less metaphorical as the poem develops, and as Wordsworth addressed the English nation in reference to global slavery, we are forced to analyze his writing's effectiveness in the political and historical contexts of the time.

Wordsworth's disregard, whether intentional or not, for the very real colonial slaves oppressed under the British empire becomes clear as he establishes a criticism of England's



hypocrisy but then focuses his censure on the massive poor class laboring in the country itself.

The introduction of his critique seems promising, and he firmly claims:

Though cold as winter, gloomy as the grave,  
 Stone-walls a prisoner make, but not a slave.  
 Shall man assume a property in man?  
 Lay on the moral will a withering ban?  
 Shame that our laws at distance still protect  
 Enormities, which they at home reject!  
 "Slaves cannot breathe in England"--yet that boast  
 Is but a mockery! when from coast to coast,  
 Though 'fettered' slave be none, her floors and soil  
 Groan underneath a weight of slavish toil,  
 For the poor Many, measured out by rules  
 Fetched with cupidity from heartless schools,  
 That to an Idol, falsely called "the Wealth  
 Of Nations," sacrifice a People's health,  
 Body and mind and soul; a thirst so keen  
 Is ever urging on the vast machine  
 Of sleepless Labour, 'mid whose dizzy wheels  
 The Power least prized is that which thinks and feels.  
 ("Humanity" ll. 78-95 in *Last Poems* pp. 212-213)

Immediately, readers expect some sort of scathing criticism of England for its claim that "Slaves cannot breathe in England" despite the fact that most of its foreign income relies on colonial slave labor; Wordsworth even exclaims "that boast/ Is but a mockery!" (ll. 84-85). He prepares readers for an explicit argument against the anti-abolitionist argument that slaves are simply considered property, addressing the "shame that [England's] at distances still protect/ Enormities, which they at home reject!" (ll.82-83). All of these statements encourage us to anticipate an overt denunciation of colonial slavery, and yet Wordsworth quickly shifts the focus on to England. While some acclaim can be offered for his defense of the working-class in England, Wordsworth's claim that "though 'fettered' slaves be none, her floors and soil/ Groan underneath a weight of slavish toil" seems exceedingly impertinent when considering his belief that the nation protected global freedom while failing to guard it at home. Many may be inclined to ask, "Well what about the thousands of slaves abroad in the British colonies who are forced to

work for the ‘Wealth of Nations’ as oppressed cogs in the ‘vast machine/ Of sleepless labour?’” (ll. 91-92, 93-94).

Granted, this passage may be read as an implicit example of England’s political failings, and the example may be further extended to suggest that if the nation treats its own citizens as slaves, how much guiltier it should be for its treatment of literal slaves; and yet, Wordsworth created for himself an impeccable opportunity to criticize the nation’s economic reliance on colonial slave labor and opted to focus more directly on the state of the homeland. The poem ends with a call for patience, as Wordsworth commends those who yield “perpetual lessons of forbearance” from nature and pause, “lest Fancy trifle with eternal laws” (ll. 104, 101). Again, Wordsworth’s active avoidance of human intervention seems somewhat ineffective, and his belief in providence as guardian of liberty seems complacent when considering it in the political context of the times.

### ***The Prelude***

Although Wordsworth dedicated three separate books in *The Prelude* to his time in France and how it influenced his views on liberty and nationhood, there are few references to Negro slavery in the entire work. The passage most relevant to this study appears in Book X, “Residence in France (Continued),” and it recounts Wordsworth’s return to England in 1792, at which time he experienced the fervent abolitionist debates that were prominent in English politics. This segment reminds readers of the early Wordsworth years, years in which the poet sympathized with the French republican cause and criticized the old institutions of Great Britain. However, even here, Wordsworth’s writing calls for faith in a higher moral force, which repudiates any sense of responsibility for men to intervene; in doing so, Wordsworth reveals his own early propensities for conservatism, with his personal philosophy granting autonomy to each

individual rather than a collective body in reforming British politics. In his eyes, if every man acted virtuous, restrained their egotism, and believed in a greater divine force that would influence and discipline the nation, the problems afflicting humanity would be corrected on their own. The foundations of this philosophy can be noted in this passage, and it helps us to understand Wordsworth's anti-intervention stance on abolition.

While Wordsworth praised the efforts of abolitionists in *The Prelude*, his description of the movement suggests that the Parliamentary defeat of Wilberforce's Abolition Bill in 1792 willingly tabled the issue while attempting to pursue other means of protecting freedom. The language describing this transition maintains an air of respect, and Wordsworth insinuates that many English citizens considered the abolition of the slave trade to be imminent in the distant future:

When to my native Land  
(After a whole year's absence) I returned  
I found the air yet busy with the stir  
Of a contention, which had been raised up  
Against the Traffickers in Negro blood,  
An effort, which though baffled, nevertheless  
Had called back old forgotten principles,  
Dismissed from service, had some diffused truths  
And more of virtuous feeling through the heart  
Of the English People. And no few of those  
So numerous (little less in verity  
Than a whole Nation crying with one voice)  
Who had been crossed in their just intent  
And righteous hope, thereby were well prepared  
To let that journey sleep awhile, and join  
Whatever other Caravan appeared  
To travel forward towards Liberty  
With more success.

(1805 *Prelude*, X, ll. 202-129)

He proposed that the abolition debate "called back old forgotten principles," which dispels any sense of novelty associated with abolitionist efforts; understanding this argument as one that had recurred in the past helps to explain why some may have been more susceptible to a gradual approach. The word "thereby" creates an association between this clause and the subsequent

claim, as if to say that because this had been a long-debated matter, the abolitionists were consequently “well-prepared” to postpone further action on the issue. Other language in the passage emphasizes the gradual nature of the campaign; for instance, Wordsworth referred to the cause as a “journey” rather than an immediate conversion. The willingness to defer reform follows because many believe that the journey will end eventually, sleeping only “awhile” but perhaps triumphing after other related causes “[traveled] forward towards Liberty/ With more success.” Like his description of the “English People,” Wordsworth trusted in this slow but sure process, and used it as a justification for his own lack of sympathy towards the abolitionist debate.

Here, Wordsworth finally admitted his apathy to the British slave trade, but asserted that he failed to retain interest only because he assumed that this smaller problem would be rectified with the expulsion of the larger evil of tyranny. Wordsworth expresses himself honestly, and while many would be quick to judge, understanding where his indifference stemmed from allows readers to more authentically comprehend the poet and his poetry. He reflected that:

...For me that strife had ne'er  
 Fastened on my affections, nor did now  
 Its unsuccessful issue much excite  
 My sorrow, having laid this faith to heart,  
 That if France prospered good Men would not long  
 Pay fruitless worship to humanity,  
 And this most rotten branch of human shame,  
 Object, as seemed, of a superfluous pains  
 Would fall together with its parent tree.  
 (1805 *Prelude*, X, ll. 219-226)

Thus, we observe the prototype of Wordsworth's later conservative stance on abolition, one rooted in gradualism and the moral conviction of the individual rather than immediate political action. He considered slavery to be “this most rotten branch of human shame,” but placed his faith in a larger transformation that would come at the hands of republican triumph. Slavery

ripens as a physical spoil of tyranny, and Wordsworth contested that destroying the fruit would serve no purpose if the tree remained intact.

Arguably, there are problematic elements of this philosophy that deserve attention, but attempting to criticize Wordsworth's views retrospectively and at face value serves little purpose in extending discourse on his poetry as a symbol for the uncertainties of the time. Instead, I aim to connect these discrepancies and provide a deeper understanding of the political stance some of Britain's most prominent and powerful politicians took amidst the drastic changes of the post-Napoleonic era. Wordsworth's philosophy, reliant on the individual, gradualism, and a greater moral force, takes shape in this passage of *The Prelude*, but it appears most prominently and problematically in a letter written in defense of land-owners mere months before the emancipation of colonial slaves in 1833.

### **Letter to Benjamin Dockray, April 1833**

The most direct and expressive illustration of Wordsworth's later attitude towards the slave question appears in a letter to Benjamin Dockray in April of 1833; the letter, written as the emancipation movement reached its climax, makes evident Wordsworth's approval of Dockray's proposed process of gradual emancipation in his 1833 *Observations Suggested by the Present State of the Slavery Question*. Tetreault argues that Wordsworth's views were "in entire accord with those advanced by Benjamin Dockray [in which] the slave, through 'industry, commerce, and care,' might purchase his freedom."<sup>36</sup> This reference opens the letter, after which Wordsworth reflected that fanaticism was "the disease of these times... as it has always been... upon attainment of its ends with disregard of the means."<sup>37</sup> Readers are then introduced to one

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<sup>36</sup> Tetreault, "Wordsworth on Enthusiasm," p. 57.

<sup>37</sup> William Wordsworth, "To Benjamin Dockray, 1833," in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years*, p. 647.

of the most explicitly political pieces of slave-related prose written by Wordsworth, and its doctrine hinges on the now fully-developed principles of gradualism, self-determinism, and moral impetus that first appeared in the poems “September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1802,” “Humanity,” and Book X of *The Prelude*.

Wordsworth’s letter introduces his conceptual schema for how abolition should come about and the parties who are relevant to the argument, and responsibility falls on the moral impetus of the slave owner rather than on administrative intervention to grant freedom. He believed that these proprietors would be righteously obligated to renounce their ownership over the slave once persuaded to believe that freedom would benefit the slave on spiritual and ethical levels:

In this question there are *three* parties, --the slave, the slaveowner, and the British people. As to the first, it might be submitted to the consideration of the owner whether, in the present state of society, he can, as a matter of private conscience, retain his property in the slave, after he is convinced that it would be for the slave’s benefit, civil, moral, and religious, that he should be emancipated. Whatever pecuniary loss might, under these circumstances, attend emancipation, it seems that a slave-owner, taking a right view of the case, ought to be prepared to undergo it. It is probable, however, that one of the best assurances which could be given of the slave being likely to make a good use of his liberty would be found in his ability and disposition to make a recompense for the sacrifice should the master, from the state of his affairs, feel himself justified in accepting a recompense.

(Letter to Benjamin Dockray, April 1833, *Letters: LY* pp. 647-648)

Much like Wordsworth’s portrayal of authority in *The Prelude*, his description of influence here relies heavily on a higher force of virtue that presumably will overpower the owner’s economic or political ambitions. The referral of accountability thus shifts from the nation to the individual, and Wordsworth considered this decision of emancipation to be “a matter of private conscience” rather than a matter of public sentiment. Wordsworth defended the liberties of the individual over a centralized government, but we must consider the fact that relying on the moral enlightenment of each gentrified landowner cannot feasibly support a functional, uncorrupt nation. More controversially, Wordsworth believed that the best indication of the slave making

“good use of his liberty” would be if he offered his owner compensation for his pecuniary sacrifice. This suggestion that the slave should feel indebted to his owner and furthermore grateful for his freedom not only reminds readers of the “pitiable gratitude” Wordsworth spoke of in his 1833 “Humanity” (l. 69) but also implies that liberty does not exist as an inherent possession for the slave. Despite numerous other poems describing liberty as an innate right that cannot be taken from man, here we see the slave owner portrayed as a sort of white-savior figure who should “feel himself justified in accepting a recompense” for sacrificing his property to procure the slave’s freedom. Individual rights hold all authority in Wordsworth’s diagram of the slave debate, but only when the individuals are the powerful and wealthy gentry class rather than the governmental institutions designed to speak on behalf of the public or the enslaved themselves.

The British government and its servants are perceived by Wordsworth as impulsive and irrelevant to the abolition dispute, and they should simply serve as observers between the slave and slave owner; this staunch anti-interference component of Wordsworth’s philosophy goes against his own critiques of the government’s inaction in protecting the poor laborers in “Humanity” and potentially indicates his bias towards landowners. After defining the relationship between slave and slave owner, Wordsworth wrote:

But by no means does it follow, from this view of individual cases, that the *third* party, the people of England, who through their legislature have sanctioned and even encouraged slavery, have a right to interfere for its destruction by a sweeping measure, of which an equivalent to the owner makes no part. This course appears to me unfeeling and unjust.

(Letter to Benjamin Dockray, April 1833, *Letters: LY* p. 648)

Even though Wordsworth believes that Parliament enabled the existence and expansion of the slave trade in the eighteenth century, he defends the rights of slave owners over a national bill that would abolish the legalization of slavery in the British colonies. Significantly, Wordsworth also argued against this “sweeping measure” of his destruction because it did not offer an evenly

aggregate recompense for the owners themselves, which implies that their ownership of slaves does not violate moral codes. In other words, his belief that owners should be reimbursed by the government for their losses insinuates either that possessing slaves was not an unethical practice deserving reprimand, or that land owners should receive a reward even though they were convinced by their consciences that they were doing the wrong thing. This somewhat flippant response makes readers more doubtful of his universal detestation of slavery, which grows stronger as he reflected that:

They who are most active in promoting entire and immediate Abolition do not seem sufficiently to have considered that slavery is not in itself at all times and under all circumstances to be deplored. In many states of society it has been a check upon worse evils; so much inhumanity has prevailed among men that the best way of protecting the weak from the powerful has often been found in what seems at first sight a monstrous arrangement; viz., in one man having a property in many of his fellows.

(Letter to Benjamin Dockray, April 1833, *Letters: LY* p. 648)

Gone are the days of emphatic praise as seen in “To Thomas Clarkson,” and the British abolition campaign no longer gleams as that “pilgrimage sublime” that Wordsworth believed would inspire all others to forever tear “the bloody Writing” (l. 5, l. 11). The main point of critique in this passage seems to be the “entire and immediate” eradication of slavery proposed by abolitionists, and the letter implicates that instantaneously releasing the “weak” slaves would endanger them to greater evils than they may suffer at the hands of their “powerful” protectors. The final fragment of this section nearly contradicts Wordsworth’s own question in “Humanity,” as he scathingly asked “Shall man assume a property in man?” (l. 80). Readers begin to wonder how Wordsworth believed his policy of avoidance to be more beneficial to slaves than a policy of intervention, and more importantly how his perception of the problem spoke to his partiality towards landowners’ rights.

As previously stated, Wordsworth’s theory on how to solve the slave question relies entirely on the personal, moral conviction of the owner, meaning that the surest way to hinder the



process would be to deny the individual his freedom to come to the conclusions under his own ethical impetus. Wordsworth expanded upon this principle because he felt convinced that the slaves would be subject to greater perils if their masters were systematically told how to treat their properties; taking away the freedom to make his own choices, the slave owner would feel less obligated to act according to his conscience:

The best surety for an uneducated man behaving with care and kindness to his beast lies in the sense of the uncontrolled property which he possesses in him. Hence a livelier interest, and a more efficient responsibility to his own conscience, than could exist were he made accountable for his conduct to law.

(Letter to Benjamin Dockray, April 1833, *Letters: LY* p. 648)

To more clearly comprehend Wordsworth's moral theory, I offer a simplified example that many of us may have experienced in our own childhoods. Imagine two children who own pets; Wordsworth suggests here that a child who takes care of their pet without the constant interference of their parents will feel more responsible for and thus more attentive to the needs of their pet than the child whose parents continually control his/her maintenance of their pet. Contextually, Wordsworth understood the integral element of the slave's well-being to be the sense of "uncontrolled" freedom that induced masters to act conscientiously. The letter's language encourages us to consider to whom and in what ways Wordsworth presented this argument, specifically in his references to the "uneducated" slave owner and the "beast[ly]" slave. If he genuinely believed that individual rights protected the slave, we wonder why he felt complacent in leaving the welfare of slaves up to "uneducated" men, and furthermore if he considered slavery to be an unethical practice, why he would compare slaves to "beast[s]." Perhaps contradictorily, Wordsworth ended the letter with a personal denunciation of slavery, assuring Dockray that he would support its eradication if a more cautious option could be proposed; this immediate flip leaves readers skeptical of Wordsworth's true intention, and

effectively unconvinced of his sincerity. In concluding his depiction of the dangers should land owners be denied the right to individually enact emancipation, he claimed:

I mention this simply by way of illustration, for no man can deplore more than I do a state of slavery in itself. I do not only deplore but I *abhor* it, if it could be got rid of without the introduction of something worse, which I must fear would not be the case with respect to the West Indies, if the question be dealt with in the way many excellent men are so early set upon.

(Letter to Benjamin Dockray, April 1833, *Letters: LY* pp. 648-649)

While a definitive line of reasoning cannot be applied to determine whether or not Wordsworth added this to the end as a method of preserving his reputation or as a genuine point of reflection, the letter in its entirety portrays an entirely different side of Wordsworth that seems less critical of slavery than we've seen in his earlier work.

Applying a critique to this letter would be difficult and precarious, so instead I offer an attempted objective summarization of its contents, as well as the importance of its elements, problematic or not. The main goal of the letter has less to do with protecting the slave and more with protecting the individual rights of land-owners; despite our modern definitions, many people in this period argued that this debate was one of property rights. Given the facts, Wordsworth's letter attests to that theory, which at the least provides us with a deeper understanding of the argument from the land-owner's perspective. Furthermore, readers can observe the fully-developed conservatism whose foundations were established as early as 1798, but this conservatism unquestionably remained linked to his life-long love of the land that he called home. While the land owners in the Lake District did not rely on slave labor, Wordsworth believed that defending the rights of land-owners in the colonies meant procuring protection for land owners in Great Britain, and any legislation that introduced the regulation of property could potentially facilitate larger, more restrictive laws in the future. This letter may contradict his previous writings because it dealt with a palpable issue relating to his home, his community, and his known way of life; additionally, we must analyze this as a letter rather than a poem or

published piece of prose, which forces us to consider his own political affiliations as separate from his intellectual, poetical modes. Lastly, regardless of its complications, Wordsworth's attitude towards slavery was indissolubly connected to his affections for land and rural life, and this letter presents one of the strongest examples of his cautions towards large government and immediate action in later life. Recognizing it as such allows readers to track the course of Wordsworth's political development, but more collectively recognize how some British citizens were drawn to the stability and tradition of Toryism after the chaos of the early nineteenth century.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while Wordsworth's seemingly prejudiced reaction to abolition in 1833 does reveal problematic elements of his personal perception of freedom, we cannot analyze it at face value as something that can be explained by one simple factor. The fight for emancipation in the British colonies had many complex elements, and that intricacy mirrors Wordsworth's own internal struggle over the issue. I became interested in this subject because of one piece of evidence, but my own further evidence has suggested that, regardless of our retrospective interpretations of moral consciousness, Wordsworth's response does not necessarily speak to a racist poet, but rather a nationalist poet positioned in an empire that relied on racial inequity for survival. Admittedly, some aspects of his nationalism show signs of prejudice, and his theory on a hierarchy of freedom that contains various levels (with mental freedom superseding physical freedom) encourages further study; some would argue that just as you can't be somewhat dead, you can't be somewhat free: you are either free or you aren't. However, this study intended to merely determine the different influences on Wordsworth's belief rather than criticize that belief itself. His response to the slave question was not merely a response to that specific debate, but

furthermore a response to the heedless, enthusiastic idealism he associated with abolitionists and the liberal cause. By recognizing the ways in which Wordsworth supported gradual abolition in 1833, we can add understanding to the conservative side of the emancipation argument and more accurately comprehend current similar issues; in doing so, we afford ourselves more opportunity for progress, cooperation, and improvement in scholarship and in life.

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